

Don't Be Fooled by Fallacies...

By Todd Havert

Reading and Writing Learning Specialist

Fallacies are statements that appear to be true on the surface but are actually misleading when you take a closer look. Both the words *fallacy* and *false* come from the same Latin root *fallere*, which means "to deceive." There are many different types of fallacies, but they all have the same intent – to trick people into believing something that isn't true.

Fallacies are commonplace in marketing and politics. Advertisers often make dubious claims in an attempt to lure consumers to buy their products. Some of these claims are subtle and implied. In a commercial for a popular clothing store, a couple of young women leave the store excited about their new clothes. Within seconds, they spy two young men on the street wearing clothes from the same store, greet them with grand smiles, and walk off happily together. The implicit claim: buying clothes at Store X will make you popular and attractive. Once you put on the clothes, you will find a date immediately. This is an example of *post hoc* reasoning, coming to a false conclusion that one event causes another simply because they happen in sequence.

Here are some other types of fallacies to look out for:

- **appeal to doubtful authority** – citing someone as an expert who does not have expertise in the relevant subject area (Bill Gates may be an authority on technology marketing, but citing his opinion on agriculture policy would not be nearly as persuasive as quoting the secretary of agriculture.)
 - **argument from analogy** – drawing a conclusion by comparing two things which are similar in one respect but are too different in other ways to make a valid comparison (Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld recently said that withdrawing U.S. forces from Iraq would be the equivalent of handing Germany back to the Nazis. The war in Iraq and World War II are both wars, but there are numerous factors that differentiate them.)
 - **begging the question** – loading a question with a conclusion based on the bias of the person posing the question (A spokesman for Russian President Putin recently refuted claims that President Putin plagiarized a paper he wrote during graduate school by saying that he [the spokesman] does not respond to such "absurd" allegations. Isn't it a response to call the allegations absurd? And what evidence does the spokesman provide that the allegations are absurd?)
 - **false dilemma** – presenting a situation in such a way that it appears to be a crisis with an either/or solution, when the issue may not be a crisis at all and may have several possible solutions (In 2005, President George W. Bush's campaign to reform Social Security was presented as an immediate crisis: follow the administration's plan or the system would soon go bankrupt. Many analysts acknowledged that Social Security would need to be adjusted in the future, but not with the same immediacy; the American public was not convinced that there was a single solution to the problem, and Congress did not act.)
 - **misleading statistics** – manipulating the numbers in a population sample as evidence that a trend exists, when the sample size is too small to be relevant (Say you sent a brief survey to a hundred people and only three people responded. If their responses were consistent with each other, it would be misleading to say that 100% of the respondents agreed on the issues you posed – technically accurate but deceptive.)
 - **sweeping generalization** – making a broad claim based on a singular occurrence instead of providing the additional proof required to support the claim (To assert that *all* politicians in California are corrupt because Congressman Duke Cunningham was convicted of breaking several laws would be unfair.)
- So the next time you come across a suspicious claim, think about whether or not it is really just a fallacy.