The Quality of Arguments: Fallacies in Argumentation

I. Criteria for Logical Assessment of Arguments

A. Arguments are *more or less* cogent.

B. Johnson and Blair Model of Argument Cogency

![RSA triangle: The criteria a good argument must satisfy.](image1)

C. Johnson and Blair’s Model applied to the Structure of Argument

![Diagram showing the structure of an argument](image2)
D. The Standard of Acceptability

Evidence must be acceptable to the judge or audience before the argument can proceed. (common knowledge, accepted by published sources or a recognized expert, construction of a cogent sub-argument).

![Diagram showing the relationship between Unacceptable Evidence, Unsuccessful Claim, and Fallacy of Problematic Premise.]

E. The Standard of Relevance

The standard of relevance asks whether the link successfully connects the evidence to the claim.

F. The Standard of Sufficiency

The standard of sufficiency asks if that link is good enough to convince an audience of the claim. In other words, does the link fully transfer the acceptability of the evidence to that of the claim?
II. Fallacies and Argument Adequacy

A. Three Basic Fallacies: One fallacy is linked to each of the three criteria mentioned above.

1. Problematic Premises. Unacceptable evidence usually results in a claim that is unsuccessful at gaining support of the audience or judge.

   a. Complete lack of evidence is a fallacy wherein the debater provides no evidence at all for his or her claim.

   b. *Begging the question* is a fallacy that occurs in an argument when the evidence is essentially the same as the claim. Because the evidence and the claim are the same, the argument essentially contains no evidence at all.

   c. *The fallacy of incompatibility* occurs when one piece of evidence is incompatible with another.
2. **Irrelevant Reason:** In combination with all evidence offered, this fallacy fails to minimally satisfy the criteria of relevance (65-67).

Johnson and Blair present an example of that fallacy in their text:

A Member of Parliament in Canada once charged, in the House of Commons, that the Federal Department of Health and Welfare had been cooperating with the Kellogg Company in permitting the sale of a cereal (Kellogg’s Corn Flakes) that had “little or no nutritional value.” Marc Lalonde, then the Minister of Health seeking to rebut that charge stated: “As for the nutritional value of Corn Flakes, the milk you have with your Corn Flakes has great nutritional value” (65-66).

a. Argument ad hominem: an attack on the arguer’s character or background that is not relevant to the argument.

b. An argument of straw: a debater construes the argument of another to be other than what it is, then, attacks the misconstrued argument rather than the actual argument. Following the metaphor of “argument of straw,” the debater reconstructs the original argument into a weaker argument of straw, then attacks that argument rather than the original one.

c. A red herring fallacy is another argument that shifts the focus away from the current discussion to an argument that is similar to but different from the current argument in the hopes that the topic of the discussion will be changed in ways that are irrelevant to the original topic.

d. Poisoning the well is a fallacious argument that attempts to discredit a person or a source in advance of their argument.
e. Guilt by association is a fallacious attempt to attack a person’s argument not on the issues pertinent to the argument, but on the basis of groups and people with whom the person is associated.

f. An appeal to fear involves an attempt to invoke fear to take the focus off the argument. An appeal to fear is only fallacious when fear is used solely to shift the focus from the issue. For example, “If we elect my opponent, we should all build bomb shelters for our families immediately and prepare to be attacked because my opponent has very little foreign policy experience.”

g. An appeal to popularity uses the popularity of a person, product, or belief to justify a favorable conclusion about that person, product or belief.

h. An appeal to tradition attempts to argue in favor of a particular action on the grounds of tradition rather than on the basis of the merits of that action. Hasty Conclusions. The general fallacy category of hasty conclusions is sometimes called “jumping to a conclusion.” This general category of fallacies is one wherein all of the evidence and arguments that the debater offers, taken in combination with one another, do not meet the test of sufficiency.

3. Hasty generalization, the first example, is a fallacy of reasoning by example. Arguments commit that fallacy when the examples selected to support the claim are insufficient either in number or in their representativeness.

a. Slippery slope arguments sometimes are fallacious. Using such arguments, debaters try to connect a series of events in a causal chain that ultimately “culminate[s] in calamity” (Govier, 439).
Contrary to popular opinion, slippery slope arguments are not necessarily fallacies (Volokh and Newman; Walton). They only are fallacies when all of the connections in the causal chain are not properly made.

b. *Two wrongs* is a label used for a fallacy commonly called “Two wrongs don’t make a right.” As “a misplaced appeal to consistency. A person is urged to accept or condone one thing that is wrong because another similar thing, also wrong, has occurred or has been accepted and condoned” (Govier 444).

c. *Improper appeal to practice* is a fallacy that assumes that a person is justified in doing things that are common practice, even if that practice is clearly wrong.

d. *Fallacy of composition* is a fallacy in which the evidence is drawn from some part of a whole, but the conclusion is about the whole (Govier 439). “He Jingkai, a debater from China, is a superb debater. Therefore, China has some of the best debaters in the world.”

e. *Fallacy of division* involves a fallacious argument in which the evidence is drawn from the whole, but the conclusion is about a part of the whole. The argument assumes that what is true of the whole must be true of its constituent parts. “Harvard is an excellent university, therefore Lawrence Tribe, who is a law professor at Harvard, must be an excellent professor.

f. *Post hoc fallacy*, also called by its Latin name *post hoc, ergo propter hoc*, which means “after this, therefore before this.” This fallacious argument assumes that, because one thing predates another, the first must have caused the second.

g. *Faulty analogy* is a fallacy that occurs when two cases are compared to each other but are not similar in terms of the relationship stated in the comparison.