

Fallacious Dialogues

Length: *At least* 4 minutes

The “calumnious art / Of counterfeited truth” (John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, Book V, ll. 770-71)

In *The Power of Critical Thinking*, Lewis Vaughn argues that studying fallacies enhances our argumentative vigilance: “The primary motivation for studying fallacies . . . is to be able to detect them so you’re not taken in by them” (155). He’s correct, I believe. But detecting a fallacy is one thing; committing one, especially unintentionally, another. How do we know when we’re using fallacies accidentally?

Well, we can start by using them on purpose.

In groups of three or four, create an argument consisting entirely of fallacies. Be sure to include each of your group members in the argument (that is, give each person lines). Also be sure to begin your argument with a scientific controversy—stem cells, global warming, solar energy, etc. (This is primarily to show you how far away from the starting point fallacies can take you.) Use each of the twenty fallacies in *The Illustrated Book of Bad Arguments* at least once. If you do so and find that your argument is under the required four minutes, reuse some of the fallacies. On the script itself, after each person’s lines, write in brackets the name of the fallacy or fallacies committed—e.g., “[hasty generalization].” One more thing, each person’s lines should represent a different genre of writing. The genre is your choice—academic journal article, blog post, YouTube video, Shakespearean tragedy, etc. The point here is to demonstrate how genre can be generative (notice that both words begin with *gen-*). What you say and how you say it will depend in part upon the genre you are representing.

Don’t worry about your argument sounding silly. Fallacious arguments often do sound silly. In fact, these should sound silly. In any case, here’s what I want: to see that you understand how each of the fallacies we’ve studied works.

An example:

Jim, the academic journal article: Observe, Todd: chairs are made of metal, and bombs are made of metal, and terrorists use bombs. Therefore, if you sit in chairs, you support terrorism [Faulty analogy].

Todd, the pugnacious pamphlet: You know, Jim, I can’t listen to you, can’t trust you, can’t even look at you, for you are a surly, onion-eyed nuthook! Besides, you got it all wrong, you ill-bred baggage. Chairs are like fathers: they have legs and support children [Ad hominem, faulty analogy, equivocation].

You will present your dialogues in class.

Have fun with these, and good luck!