

Critical Thinking Practice^{*}

Exercise 1. Evaluating a Writer's Purpose, Audience, Point of View, and Tone to Determine Credibility:

Evaluate the following excerpt from an argument against gun control written by a newspaper columnist who once served as a public relations specialist for the National Rifle Association. Evaluate it for credibility based on these factors:

- Does the writer support the claim(s) with evidence?
- Does the writer reveal how and where evidence was obtained?
- Does the writer recognize that other points of view may be legitimate?
- Does the writer use sarcasm or make personal attacks on opponents?
- Does the writer reach a conclusion that is in proportion to the amount of evidence provided?
- Does the writer have credentials that invest the work with authority?
- Does the writer seem biased?

¹The gun control issue, then, is never a question of what the government “allows” us to own. ²The Constitution states that the government has *no authority* over the firearms ownership of the people. ³The people, not the government, possess the absolute right in the area of gun ownership. ⁴If you or I want to own an AR-15 or any other gun, it is none of the government’s business *why* we want it, and certainly none of its business to presume that we may be up to no good. ⁵In a free society, the salient question is *never* whether the government can trust the people but always whether the people can trust their government. ⁶The history of the Second Amendment makes this point ever so clear. ⁷You could spend a lifetime studying the writings of the Founding Fathers and would never find among any of them the kinds of sentiments expressed by our 20th-century gun controllers – sentiments that reflect a profound distrust for a free people. ⁸You would not find a single person among all the founders of our nation who was worried about firearms in the hands of the citizenry. ⁹The very idea is preposterous. – Roger Koopman, “Second Defense”

Exercise 2. Evaluating a Writer's Deductive Reasoning to Determine Validity and Logic:

Study the following excerpt from “The Declaration of Independence.” Identify the assumptions on which this argument is based and explain how one assumption leads to another. What kinds of evidence could be provided to support each assumption?

¹We hold these truths to be self-evident that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. ²That to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed. ³That whenever any form of government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the right of the people to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their safety and happiness. – Thomas Jefferson

Exercise 3. Evaluating a Writer's Deductive Reasoning to Determine Validity and Logic

¹Creationists say that evolutionary theory, because it seeks not to predict but only to explain what happened already, is not proper science but merely a belief system, which is to say, a religion. ²And the First Amendment says that no religion shall be fostered over another by the Federal Government; ³therefore, evolution should only be taught in schools with the caveat that it is a theory. – Jake Page

Exercise 4: Evaluating Writing for Logical Fallacies.

Examine the following sentences to determine which logical fallacies are present.

Ad hominem (personal attack): using a personal attack, unrelated to the thesis, to explain it

Appeal to tradition: relying on tradition as an explanation

Bandwagon argument: justifying an argument because “everyone” thinks that way

Begging the question: assuming what first needs to be proved or answered before taking action

Equivocation: explaining one word by using the same or a very similar word

False analogy: assuming that two things that are similar in one way are similar in other ways

False authority: assuming an expert in one field might be an expert in another

False cause (*post hoc, ergo propter hoc*): arguing that because two events are related in time, one *caused* the other

False dilemma (either/or fallacy): insisting that there are just two alternatives, when there may be many

Guilt by association: unfairly criticizing/accusing someone because of their association with others

Hasty/sweeping generalizations: “leaping to conclusions” – generalizing based on very little evidence

Oversimplifying: arguing for a very simple explanation to a very complex issue

Dodging the issue (red herring): diverting attention from the real problem by highlighting something unrelated

Slippery slope: arguing that one thing will lead to a cascade of unwanted events

1. A successful politician has to be either a liar or just plain lucky.
2. Bill Collins was an outstanding quarterback in college, and I believe he will make an outstanding senator today!
3. Ellen failed her first quiz; I'd say she's a poor student.
4. Ever since our new school superintendent took office last January, crime has increased 14 percent.
5. Fitz Holladay has a documented problem with alcohol from his college days; his is unfit to run for governor.
6. I'm not voting for Judge Barlow; she belongs to the same club as that lawyer who was recently disbarred.
7. Liz got wet and cold in the rain, so now she has a cold!
8. Many college students, faced with unbelievable external pressures, cheat on exams and homework; therefore, it makes sense to go ahead and do that once and a while.
9. None of the children in my family drink coffee; obviously, children don't like coffee.
10. Since both the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times* endorsed the senator for reelection, she has my vote!
11. That merchant has been alleged to be a thief and a liar; his arguments against a sales tax are worthless.

12. The Olympic champion's face on that box of cereal guarantees it's great for you!
13. The current economic crisis is the result of poor decisions by the Bush administration.
14. The new mayor is not even the head of his own household, so how can we expect him to be the leader of a city?
15. This novel has been No. 1 on the best-seller list for weeks. You should read it!
16. We Americans have the right to pursue happiness, and we should want to do what is right. So let's make happiness our goal in life.
17. We can eliminate hunger by growing more food.
18. We have never allowed students without a high school diploma or GED to take college classes; therefore, we should not allow such students into our program.
19. We have two choices: to build more nuclear power plants or to be completely dependent on foreign oil.
20. We know this is a natural law because it feels natural.
21. We need to get rid of the liars and thieves in government!
22. Why worry about overcrowded schools when we ought to be trying to attract a professional hockey franchise?
23. Gun control and state-subsidized health care are the first steps toward a socialist government.

Exercise 5: Evaluating Writing for Logical Fallacies.

Read the following paragraph and identify the logical fallacies you may find in it.

¹As the Oscar-winning director, Scavan Kleck has argued, "Animal experimentation saves lives." ²Isn't the life of a little girl more important than the life of a chimpanzee? ³We have to choose: we can either experiment on animals to find cures for life-threatening diseases or we can stand by helplessly while thousands of children die. ⁴Experimentation is necessary because research is important. ⁵And why should we worry about what happens to animals in laboratories when the real problem is how people treat their pets? ⁶Advocates of animal rights are a bunch of sentimental vegetarians who don't care what happens to children, and they will never be satisfied with banning painful experiments on animals. ⁷If they succeed in getting legislation passed that restricts experimentation, it's only a question of time before the sale of meat is prohibited. ⁸Just look at the trouble they've already caused. ⁹The cost of research has soared since people started protesting against animal experimentation.

*The example paragraphs and sentences used on this worksheet come from Hodges, John C., and Mary E. Whitten. *Harbrace College Handbook*. 9th edition. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1982. Ch. 23; and Hodges, John C., Suzanne Strobeck Webb, Robert Keith Miller, and Winifred Bryan Horner. *Hodges' Harbrace Handbook*. 14th edition. Boston: Heinle & Heinle, 2001. Ch. 35.