Logical Fallacies
for the writer of critical essays on literature

Logical fallacies are arguments that are built upon faulty premises. We call them “logical” because they seem logical, but are actually fallacious in nature. A premise is a statement on which another statement is inferred or based. Fallacious reasoning is problematic because conclusions reached as a result of this type of thinking are inaccurate. Therefore, no one can use logical fallacies as standards of proof when effectively arguing a point. Be aware that many fallacies overlap or lead to one another. Logical fallacies may, or may not, be intentionally used. However, by identifying common types of logical fallacies you can avoid using them in your own thinking/writing and identify them when you are evaluating research. Being able to identify logical fallacies in another person’s argument will help you dig out the hidden assumptions and will therefore enable you to better evaluate that argument. Below are a list of fallacies and fallacious strategies.

Amoeba Vocabula: using vague expressions to avoid committing to a statement (i.e. “sort of” “kind of” “seems to be”).
- Yeats sort of implies that sometimes rape is okay if it’s culturally relevant in his poem “Leda and the Swan.”
- Poe was somewhat obsessed with death, as shown in the imagery in “The Raven.”

False Analogy*: comparing two things as though they are actually alike when they have key features which are different (i.e. comparing needlepoint to brain surgery).
- When Pound compares the faces of the metro to “petals on a wet, black bough” it’s like saying that the people are clinically depressed.
- When Armand burns Desiree’s belongings at the end of “Desiree’s Baby,” he is saying that Desiree never existed.

Begging the Question (Circular Logic): providing the initial claim as a reason for the conclusion, offering no actual support for the claim while appearing to do so by reusing the premise (i.e. Young people like rap because it is the most enjoyable music to listen to).
- Mrs. Ansley and Mrs. Slade view each other in a twisted way because that’s how they viewed each other when they were younger.
- Nightingales symbolize death, so the Nightingale in “Ode to a Nightingale” represents death.

Equivocation: when the same word is used twice but without acknowledging a shift in context, the reader is manipulated into thinking the word means the same thing both times, but does not (i.e. This affair is none of your affair).
- It’s clear at the end of “The Yellow Wallpaper” that the narrator has gone mad because she flies into a rage, peeling off the wallpaper violently and “knawing on the bedstead.”
**Fallacy of Composition**: claiming that something in one medium (either fictional, artistic in representation or in real life) cannot be valid, worthy for another medium (i.e. a sexually explicit scene in a porno is the same thing as a sexual act in the bedroom).
- Gabriel’s feelings for this wife towards the end of “The Dead” are grotesque and violent because he acts like he wants to perform S&M on her: “He longed to be the master of her strange mood.”
- It isn’t appropriate for filmmakers to recreate the explicit sex scenes in Joyce’s “Ulysses” because that is pornographic.

**Tempus E Locus Peculiaris**: making the assumption that any difference between two or more things is only a result of time and place without proof of that assumption (i.e. Teen pregnancy is more frequent today than it was in the 1950’s because the 1950’s were a more innocent time).
- Sykes is a man of his time; he only treats Delia unfairly because that is how it was with women and men back then.
- Armand’s shame that his child is biracial is valid because in those days it was shameful to have sex with someone of another race.

**False Cause Fallacy**: assuming causal relationships between two events based solely on the two events happening close in time, or “after this, therefore because of this” (i.e. “I joined the Confederacy for two weeks. Then I deserted. The Confederacy fell” – Mark Twain).
- Willa Cather wrote “Neighbour Rosicky” because she was old and about to die, like her title character.
- Whitman’s “O Captain! My Captain!” was written soon after Lincoln’s assassination and is therefore about the murdered president.

**Slippery Slope**: “dominio theory” and “ripple effect,” aka one thing leads to another (i.e. If we legalize marijuana, all teenagers will become drug addicts).
- If we view Emily Dickinson’s poem “Much Madness is Divinest Sense” as feminist, then everything she ever wrote has a political slant to it.
- Because the woman’s movement didn’t achieve full liberation until the 1960’s, all female writers before that point are not feminists.

**Ad Hominem (Personal Attack)**: attacking someone personally while criticizing them in a totally different arena (i.e. Bill Clinton cannot be a good president because he cheated on his wife. George Bush cannot be a good president because he once snorted cocaine.).
- Edna St. Vincent Millay was rumored to be bisexual or lesbian. We can assume then why she is so aggressive toward men in her work.

**Poisoning the Well**: dismissing another person’s ideas and insights because of that person’s assumed prejudiced, self-interested, negative motivations (i.e. All white people today are racists if they don’t agree to pay for the damage done by the KKK).
- Edgar Allan Poe married his first cousin, who was only 13 years old at the time of their union, which makes him a pervert and his writings the scribblings of a pedophile.

*Note not in Adios, Strunk and White*
- William Faulkner grew up in the South and served in the Confederate army so none of his works really can be seen as defending the rights of African-Americans.

**Straw Man Fallacy**: purposely misinterpreting or mistaking an opponent’s argument as a way to make it easier to denigrate or attack (i.e. Person #1: “Could you change the toilet paper roll?” Person #2: “Are you saying that I never change the toilet paper roll?”).

- In “Portrait d’une Femme” Ezra Pound paints a picture of his hatred toward women, clearly illustrated in the lines, “Your mind and you are our Sargasso Sea.”

**Red Herring/Smoke Screen Fallacy**: bringing up irrelevant issues that have more emotional appeal than the real issues in order to divert attention away from the point (i.e. John Kerry can not support our troops because he threw away the Congressional medals awarded to him from his service in Vietnam).

- The women portrayed in Eliot’s “Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” are mean and judgmental, not unlike his crazy wife Vivian who tormented him for so many years before becoming institutionalized.

**Appeal to Authority Fallacy**: claiming that a statement/argument is more valid because it comes from an authority figure (i.e. Well my uncle told me that crime is up in Orange County and he knows because he’s a police officer).

- Hughes’ depiction in “Theme for English B” of what it is like to be a minority student in a classroom is most accurate because he lived through that experience himself.

**Appeal to Moderation Fallacy**: claiming that a statement/argument is not valid because it is merely radical or extreme (i.e. Those women only want gay marriage to be legal because they are Feminazis).

- The American in Hemingway’s “Hills Like White Elephants” is a villain because he wants the girl to have an abortion and that is just wrong.

**Appeal to Common Sense Fallacy**: claiming that a statement/argument is valid or invalid because everyone knows it (i.e. Everybody knows that a high fat diet causes obesity. It is common knowledge that AIDS is a gay disease).

- Everyone knows that Mrs. Dalloway was modeled after Virginia Woolf’s own lesbian lover, Vita Sackville-West.

**Appeal to Faith Fallacy**: claiming that one has specialized knowledge or better knowledge than others because of spiritual beliefs (i.e. I am a more trustworthy employee than that atheist because I believe in Jesus Christ).

- As a Christian, I understand the symbols in Hawthorne’s “Young Goodman Brown” better than anyone who hasn’t accepted Christ.

- Having been rejected by my son’s father, I perhaps understand the pain of Desiree more than other readers.

**Hasty Generalization/Misapplied Generalization**: coming to conclusions before one has thorough evidence (i.e. Since ½ of the states are blue, tomorrow we will have a Democrat in the White House, as CBS did in the 2000 presidential election against Al Gore). A misapplied generalization is when someone generalizes about a situation as
though it is true in all situations (i.e. A man with lipstick on his collar is cheating on his wife).

- Clearly Delia is a murderer because she never went to help Sykes after the snake bit him.
- Most women want a family and want to be married, that is how we know that the narrator of “The Yellow Wallpaper” is losing her mind…because she rejects these traditional values.

**Ad Ignorantium (Burden of Proof):** claiming that a position is valid because it hasn’t been proven wrong (i.e. There’s a good chance that extraterrestrial life exists because SETI hasn’t had any proof otherwise. No one has proven that Cheetos cause any particular disease so they must be good for you).

- Since Emily Dickinson didn’t publish much of her work in life, it’s fair to assume that she wasn’t interested in publishing her work.
- Walt Whitman never came “out of the closet” so he clearly wasn’t homosexual.

**Margine Immunitas:** claiming that minorities are exempt from judgment and/or critical analysis because of their minority status (i.e. The LAPD is just trying to harass Marion Barry because he’s black. Marion Barry is the former mayor of Washington DC who was arrested in 1990 after being caught on tape smoking crack cocaine with an undercover officer who was acting as a prostitute).

- The writings of black Americans on the issue of race in America is more relevant than the writings of white Americans on the same subject because African-Americans are the victims of racism, so their point-of-view is more relevant.

**Ego Es Ibi Fallacy:** judging the worth of a work of art on its ability to create verisimilitude, or a likeness to reality (i.e. Picasso is not talented because the people he paints don’t look like real people).

- An angel will never fall to the earth, so Gabriel Garcia Marquez’s story “The Man with Enormous Wings” is not significant.
- What are the chances that Mrs. Slade’s husband would really be waiting for Mrs. Ansley after Mrs. Slade sent the letter? Slim. Therefore the story is flawed.

**Either-Or Fallacy (False Dilemma):** presenting only two alternatives in an argument when many possibilities exist, or pretending that an argument is far simpler than it really is (i.e. Either you support the troops in Iraq, or you support the terrorists).

- Either you view Young Goodman Brown as a prude who is self-centered in his view of the world, or you view him as an innocent who can’t come to terms with the tainted aspects of adult life.

**Affective Fallacy:** claiming that something is quality or good because it appeals to human emotion and feeling (i.e. “The Notebook” should’ve won an academy award because it’s a real tear-jerker).

- The suffering of Elisa in Steinbeck’s “The Chrysanthemums” is palpable and made me feel the tension in her life, making it the greatest story of stifled love ever written.
- “Hills Like White Elephants” is one of Hemingway’s greatest achievements because you can really feel the struggle going on in the girl’s heart and mind.
Ad Populum (Bandwagon): claiming that the majority opinion must be the correct opinion (i.e. Most Germans in the 1930’s thought that Hitler’s ideas were good ones, therefore they must have been correct).
- Oprah Winfrey has deemed Maya Angelou’s contributions as a writer as equal to that of William Shakespeare…clearly proving that Angelou is one of the greatest writers of all time.
- Stephen King sells so many books because he is a quality writer.

Subjectivist Fallacy: the “it’s my opinion” fallacy, claiming that you like or dislike something without evidence to support or back up your opinion (i.e. Even though I’m not a professional gymnast, I think that the Japanese girl should’ve won the floor competition because her routine was better. That’s just my opinion).
- Even though many scholars classify “Young Goodman Brown” as an allegory, I didn’t see it that way. In my opinion, the story is surreal.
- I get the feeling that Sykes would have killed Delia if she hadn’t let the snake get him first. I don’t know why I feel that way, but I do…strongly.