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Nancy Bressler  
*Wheeling Jesuit University*

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## **Assessing Logical Fallacies in Persuasion: Using Role-play to Identify and Critique Solid Reasoning in Public Speaking**

**Nancy Bressler, PhD**  
Assistant Professor  
Wheeling Jesuit University  
nbressler@wju.edu

### **Abstract**

Because the development of solid reasoning skills is an instrumental aspect of speech formation, this teaching activity draws connections among the identification of logical fallacies, the recognition of the importance of soundly reasoned arguments, and the reduction of speaker apprehension. Students are asked to design their own humorous skits that exemplify a logical fallacy. This exercise encourages them to consider not only how fallacies can be based on faulty reasoning, but the broader implications of logical fallacies, including speaker credibility, underlying rhetorical uses, and to what extent a lack of speaker motivation can lead to deficient reasoning. Through student collaboration and a classroom atmosphere that emphasizes humor within the project, this activity can also decrease speaker apprehension.

### **Courses**

Public Speaking, Advanced Public Speaking, Persuasive Speaking, and Introduction to Communication

### **Objectives**

- To increase students' ability to identify common persuasive logical fallacies.
- To increase the application of course concepts to students' persuasive arguments and bolster their ability to make sound reasoning arguments in their own persuasive speeches.
- To expand students' ability to evaluate the logic of reasoning.
- To reduce speaker apprehension and increase student comfort levels while speaking in public.

### **Introduction and Rationale**

As Perloff (2013) argued, persuasion is the ultimate human experience. Within the field of persuasion, fallacies are a fundamental aspect (Aristotle, 1984). Speakers often focus on other public speaking aspects, such as the motivation for the speech, underlying rhetorical themes, and message creation. This exercise includes those elements while also focusing students' attention on formulating soundly reasoned statements. Poorly reasoned statements made during a speech can reduce speaker credibility, create uncertainty about the speaker's ethics, and undermine other crucial statements made during a speaker's message (van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 1992).

Nancy Bressler (PhD, Bowling Green State University) is an Assistant Professor of Communications and Composition at Wheeling Jesuit University. She has taught communication courses, such as Presentational Speaking, Communication Theory, Research Methods, and Race, Gender, and Class in Media. Her recent research focuses on critical/cultural studies and media representation, as well as the development of media-based pedagogies that emphasize media literacy, critical thinking skills, student hands-on learning, and community engagement.

A common example of reasoning that has gone wrong because of faulty logic or weak reasoning is a logical fallacy (Hansen, 2002). These arguments imitate solid reasoning, but are actually examples of weak reasoning or faulty logic to support claims (Hansen, 2002). This teaching activity recognizes that logical fallacies can stem from a speaker's attempt to persuade. Logical fallacies and false reasoning statements are common, everyday occurrences (van Eemeren & Houtlosser, 2009). According to Floyd (2011), ten of the most commonly used logical fallacies that are also clearly distinct from one another are: ad hominem, slippery slope, either/or, false-cause, bandwagon appeal, hasty generalization, red herring, straw man, begging the question, and appeal to false authority. See Appendix A for brief descriptions of each logical fallacy.

However, this activity extends beyond the desire to merely identify logical fallacies. Instead, it allows students to assess and critically analyze how to make sound reasoning arguments in their speeches. Rather than only reading about logical fallacies and examples of poor reasoning skills, students bring these concepts to life. This employs a pedagogical idea of active learning, in which student activities are the main focus of the learning process (Prince, 2004). Pedagogical research has shown that when students are actively engaged in classroom activities, instead of lectures, there is a better understanding of course content and a greater collaboration with peers (see, for instance, Baepler & Walker, 2014; Bonwell & Eison, 1991; Roehl, Reddy, & Shannon, 2013). Active learning activities are those that "involve students in doing things and thinking about what they are doing" (Bonwell & Eison, 1991, p. 1). One of the categories of instructional methods within active learning is role-playing (Zayapragassarazan & Kumar, 2012).

This activity uses role-play to not only demonstrate poor reasoning skills, but also to demonstrate how to correct them. Students are instructed to apply their knowledge of logical fallacies by designing a humorous skit that persuades their classmates about a topic and exhibits the faulty reasoning behind their logical fallacy. First, students demonstrate the logical fallacy through their skit; after their presentation is complete, students provide a second version in which they utilize only solid reasoning skills. The clear distinction between the two examples demonstrates how to utilize solid reasoning when engaging in public speaking. The activity culminates with a discussion about the broader implications of logical fallacies, poor reasoning skills, and the motivation and rhetorical techniques that can underlie persuasive arguments.

Finally, this activity can also help to reduce speaker stage fright and speech anxiety. Instructors should encourage the students to speak as their characters, not as themselves, during their skits. Through the use of an artificially created character designed for comedy, students feel comfortable to speak freely and demonstrate both illogical and sound reasoning. Research has also shown that humor can reduce communication apprehension and avoidance (Hackman & Barthel-Hackman, 1993). Lefcourt and Martin (1986) even identified what they called "coping humor," which employs humor to manage stressful situations. Students can use humor through this activity to reduce stress associated with public speaking.

I also recommend that instructors assess students on more of a pass/fail scale to eliminate the additional pressure of attaining a high grade. Booth-Butterfield (1988) concluded that by manipulating motivation and acquaintance factors in the classroom, student anxiety and avoidance could be decreased. By eliminating the pressure of a grade and having students work in small groups, an instructor can help students feel less anxious about public speaking.

Finally, research has shown that students who connect with their fellow classmates are motivated to take pleasure in class activities and perform better on academic assignments

(Battistich et al., 1995). As Glaser and Bingham (2009) observed, “any activity that required the students to interact helped them get to know each other and seemed to have deepened their sense of connectedness” (p. 60). Therefore, this activity encourages student interaction to foster a sense of connectedness that reduces anxiety toward public speaking.

### **Description of the Activity**

This activity can be completed in less than one hour, making it feasible to complete within most scheduled classes. Prior to the class, instructors should print out a copy of Appendix B, which features ten different types of fallacies; cut along the solid lines. Put the cutouts into a container.

After class has begun, explain to the whole class that a logical fallacy is “a line of reasoning that, even if it makes sense, doesn’t genuinely support a speaker’s point” (Floyd, 2011, p. 370). Emphasize that fallacies are not necessarily wrong or bad, but are illogical and do not support the speaker’s argument. Next, introduce the ten most common logical fallacies. Facilitate a discussion that explains not only each logical fallacy, but also the circumstances in which one might use a logical fallacy as a speaker. I begin the discussion portion by asking the class as a whole the following questions:

1. Have you ever heard a speaker use a logical fallacy? What was your reaction to his/her statement? What was your overall impression of the speaker?
2. Can you think of a context in which a logical fallacy can also employ sound reasoning? In your experience, is this possible?
3. When a speaker does use illogical reasoning, to what extent does that hinder the speaker’s credibility and ethical objectives within the speech?

These discussion questions will draw connections between the student objectives and the course content.

The overall goal of this activity is for students to assess sound reasoning within speeches. However, instructors can also note that even if a speaker uses a logical fallacy, that does not mean the speaker’s entire argument should be ignored. Assessing logical fallacies also means engaging in a charitable reading of what the speaker is saying. In other words, students can analyze how audience members can take the time to acknowledge that the speaker’s message may have merit even if the speaker engages in a logical fallacy.

Next, divide the class into 10 groups and have each group draw a logical fallacy from the prepared container. Within the next 10–20 minutes (time length depending on the class period), each group should design a short skit about 1 minute in length. During this skit, each group should clearly attempt to persuade the audience about something, as well as demonstrate the fallacy that they have arbitrarily picked. Students can create the situation and characters in their skit; students also devise their own arguments and reason for giving the speech. After the group presents its skit, the rest of the class guesses which logical fallacy was depicted. Once the class correctly guesses the logical fallacy, the group will then present a line of reasoning that avoids the logical fallacy.

A few guidelines for the skit:

- Emphasize that the students should create characters in their skits. These can be real or fictional, but they should not be themselves or anyone else in the classroom. This is a crucial element to bolster students’ public speaking skills.

- Also encourage the students to use humor when creating their skits. I do caution students to avoid unnecessary giggling or enticing laughter from their group members. This is also not a *Saturday Night Live* skit – so no mockeries, parodies, etc. The students’ goals are both to entertain and to have a coherent line of reasoning in their presentations.

After the preparation time has elapsed, ask for volunteers who would like to present first. Each time I have used this activity in the classroom, many volunteers were eager to present. Allow approximately 3 minutes for each group. This should give enough time for the skit, fallacy identification, and alternative reasoning.

### Debriefing

Once all the students have presented their skits, I recommend having two discussions that reflect the broader implications of sound reasoning in persuasion. First ask each group to consider among themselves the following debriefing questions:

1. In what ways did your fallacy serve your underlying argument? In what ways did it not?
2. How did your motivation for persuasion affect your logical fallacy?
3. What could be a rhetorical use for your fallacy? How could your logical fallacy bolster your ethos potential with the audience?
4. Imagine you heard someone give a speech that included one example of unsound reasoning or a logical fallacy within an overall compelling argument. How could you overcome that one flaw to critically listen to the rest of the speaker’s message? How can you, as an audience member, separate logical fallacies or faulty reasoning from the broader message the speaker is trying to convey?

These debriefing questions encourage a stimulating conversation among each small group. Rather than merely identifying logical fallacies or poor reasoning, students now have the opportunity to consider the broader implications, including speech context, motivation, rhetorical uses, and the assessment of other speakers. Once each group discusses, gather the class together as a whole to continue the conversation. This allows each group member to reflect on sound reasoning with his/her own arguments, as well as to consider how to listen to others’ speeches.

### Appraisal

Overall, this activity encourages students to become active learners rather than passively listen to a professor explain the communication ideas. For instance, students have commented that when a speaker has used a logical fallacy, some students can and some cannot see past the flaw. This continues a discussion about the rest of the content in the speech, the context and motivation of the speech, and the situation in which the speech occurred. While field-testing this in the classroom, I have noticed that the students are more engaged in the creation of the skits and discussions with their classmates and less interested in watching the clock, texting their friends, and packing up early. I typically use activities like this prior to having students give any formal speeches for grades. This helps them develop public speaking techniques and confidence before any official assessment. The students have been encouraging to each group and respectful of the scenarios their fellow classmates have created. This exercise can be the beginning of meaningful discussions about critical listening, charitable reading of speeches, rhetorical uses of

persuasion, and the motivation behind persuasive arguments. Therefore, this activity promotes interaction, creative and critical thinking, and solid reasoning skills in each of the students.

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### Appendix A

Ad hominem = When a speaker irrelevantly criticizes a person rather than the person's argument.

Bandwagon appeal = When a speaker asserts that because many people have accepted the argument, so should the audience.

Begging the question = When a speaker uses an argument in which a conclusion is derived from premises that presuppose the conclusion.

Either/or = When a speaker incorrectly provides two alternatives and suggests that because one option is so negative, the audience should adopt the alternative.

False authority = When declarations are made by someone who is not an expert.

False cause = When a speaker incorrectly reasons that a previous event caused a later event simply because one preceded the other.

Hasty generalization = When a speaker has a few examples that support his/her claim, then makes an extensive and widespread conclusion.

Red herring = When a speaker redirects the audience's focus to one irrelevant and trivial detail of the speaker's argument.

Slippery slope = When a speaker extends a chain of causal premises beyond what can reasonably be supported by the premises.

Straw man = When a speaker misrepresents an opponent's argument to make it appear easy to defeat.

### Appendix B

Ad hominem	False cause
Bandwagon appeal	Hasty generalization
Begging the question	Red herring
Either/or	Slippery slope
False authority	Straw man