

Does the author draw relevant inferences from the evidence?

1. Attacking the person (The *ad hominem* argument)

Often this takes the form of appeals to prejudices and emotions. The argument is sidestepped by discrediting the person who proposed it. Presenting supposedly damaging evidence against someone's motives, character or private life diverts attention from the argument and is likely to stir prejudices. The fact that a writer may have been cruel and ruthless, a womaniser who deceived his wife and left his children to fend for themselves, has nothing to do with judgements about the quality of his work.

Example: Electoral reform

In a recent article criticising the arguments of those who are opposed to electoral reform, the journalist's strategy is clear almost from the first paragraph. He sets about attacking opponents of electoral reform, not for their views on it, but on other quite irrelevant aspects of their lives: their 'good taste' and 'decency' among other things:

'Standing out among the no men is John Prescott, the former deputy prime minister whose offences against good taste and decency are too numerous to list. Over the last decade or so, it has been a reasonable rule of thumb that any cause he champions is a lost cause.'

He then descends into simple, rather crude, name-calling. People are described as 'cave-dwellers' and 'club-draggers':

'Hostility to reform among some Labour tribalists has certainly been swollen by their bitterness that the Lib Dems entered the coalition with the Tories. But among many of those Labour cave-dwellers, antipathy towards Liberals long predates the formation of the coalition. Indeed, they are partly to blame for it. Labour club-draggers thwarted Tony Blair when he attempted to do a deal with the Lib Dems from a position of Labour strength.'

2. Popularity

Perhaps even more widely used as a method of diverting our attention away from the weakness of an argument and a writer's lack of evidence is to make an appeal to popular opinion on the grounds that if everybody thinks this way it must be right. Of course, what is often taken for common opinion is not what amounts to common sense. It was common opinion in the seventeenth century that the Sun moved around the Earth, which was stationary at the centre of the Universe. Indeed, Galileo was widely believed to be showing the early signs of madness to believe otherwise. Everyone realised that if the earth were moving around the Sun they would all be struggling to stay on their feet.



Example: Electoral reform

In the article on electoral reform, the journalist employs exactly this strategy to enlist the support of the reader, when he attempts to line us up with popular opinion, albeit on a completely different issue. In the first paragraph he criticises an ex-minister not for her views on electoral reform, but on another issue, parliamentary expenses, which is irrelevant to electoral reform, but about which he knows his readers are sure to disagree with her:

‘That ex-minister’s most memorable recent contribution to British politics was to incite a near riot by the *Question Time* audience to whom she tried to explain away the parliamentary expenses scandal.’

The *Question Time* audience may indeed have been of one opinion, but this alone doesn’t mean that there was no value in the ex-minister’s arguments on electoral reform or, indeed, the expenses scandal. Crowds are often driven by strong emotions and prejudices, rather than reasoned analysis.

3. Authority

Appeals to authority work as a diversionary tactic by reassuring you that you can trust the writer’s opinion, because it’s supported by a reliable, well-known authority. You are encouraged to accept that, as a result, there is no need to scrutinise the writer’s arguments so thoroughly. This can take a number of different forms. One of the most common is to appeal to the authority of tradition: something that has stood the test of time must be right, and anything that shares the characteristics of tradition or simple longevity, must also be right.

Example: A Chartreuse advertisement

‘In all the world, only four monks at the Monastery of La Grande Chartreuse in France know the secret formula of Chartreuse Liqueur. Since 1605, no one has ever duplicated this rare recipe combining more than 130 different herbs, gathered by the Monks on the hillsides near the Monastery. Try Chartreuse yourself, and you will discover why it is known as the “Queen of Liqueurs”.’

Example: Scotch advertisement

‘Those who have that special awareness of what constitutes a really fine Scotch invariably turn to House of Lords. They share a tradition with members of the House of Lords, often called “the most exclusive club in the world,” who serve and enjoy this rare Scotch.’¹



Exercise

Collect examples of commercials that are running on the TV and in magazines, which draw upon the prestige of science to sell their products, like toothpaste and washing powder. Note the scientific terms that are used and try to discover exactly what they mean. Do they make the product any better? How many do you suspect have been invented by the advertisers themselves?

For example, some years ago a washing powder was sold on the basis that it contained a miracle new ingredient, 'Bluinite'. When you looked into the packet you could see small blue specks, which led you to suspect that the advertiser had just created this new ingredient to describe the appearance of the powder, which literally had 'blue in it'.

4. Fear

The opposite tactic can work just as well as the appeal to an authority. Rather than reassure someone that her argument can be trusted, a writer raises her reader's fears that her opponent's arguments cannot.

Example: Far right parties and immigration

Far right parties attempt to defeat the arguments for a relaxation of immigration rules by raising the fears of voters, who are told that their national culture will be diluted or 'swamped' by a huge influx of immigrants, leaving fewer jobs and homes for the rest.

Example: The Government and the Opposition

A government that looks as if it is going to lose an election tells the electorate that the opposition has no experience of government and voters will experience all sorts of disasters if they are voted into power.

5. The compromise

Using this device, writers divert attention away from the strength or weakness of their argument and train it, instead, on its appearance as the most 'reasonable' compromise.

Example: Extreme political parties

This is probably more difficult to detect than the other forms of irrelevant inferences, mainly because it is easier to disguise. Nevertheless, it appears in its least disguised form when mainstream political parties attempt to neutralise the arguments of smaller parties and rob them of any legitimacy they have earned by labelling them as extreme parties that pose a real danger to social, economic or political stability.



6. The greater evil

A similar diversionary strategy is to discourage action against some admitted evil by citing an even greater evil, about which the original argument is not proposing to do anything. The fear of an even greater evil diverts attention away from the original evil, even though there is no good reason for not tackling both.

Example: A doctor and the risks of smoking

As a doctor you might argue that we should tackle the number of people dying from smoking related illnesses by raising the price of cigarettes to levels that would force people to give up. But then the opposition, whose interests would be badly affected by such a policy, might argue that more people die in road accidents, so money would be better spent in tackling this instead.

The extreme flexibility of this makes it a very popular strategy. You can always find an even greater evil to something. But still, if Y is a greater evil than X, this is no reason for not tackling X; and, at the same time, it is a sound reason for working energetically to tackle Y.

¹ Both of these examples are taken from Richard D. Altick's, *Preface to Critical Reading*, Fifth edition, (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1969), pp. 328-9.