MAKE BETTER ARGUMENTS: UNDERSTANDING LOGICAL FALLACIES

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A longtime IDEA trainer and lecturer in Communications at the University of Nevada, Reno, weighs in on the role of sportsmanship and fair play in contemporary debate.

ARE: Building Arguments

Most students in the Middle School Public Debate Program are familiar with the three essential parts of an argument. Just as a reminder, an easy way to remember these three parts is the abbreviation ARE. A stands for assertion. This is a claim about the world, or a simple statement:

- “Homework should be banned.”
- “Poverty is harmful.”
- “The United Nations should be reformed.”

An assertion itself is not an argument. It has no support, and so, by itself, it's basically nothing other than a baseless claim. The second part of an argument is reasoning – the R. Adding reasoning is essential to making arguments. The reasoning part of an argument is the “because” part of the argument:

- “Homework should be banned because it interferes with effective learning.”
- “Poverty is harmful because when families are poor, they cannot regularly feed their children. For example, often poor families have to choose between paying their rent and buying food.”
- “The United Nations should be reformed because it is not effective now.”

Adding reasoning to your assertion helps to make it an argument. However, you’re still missing one part. You’ll still need the E - evidence. Evidence provides proof of your reasoning. The most common type of evidence is the example. For the arguments we’ve been looking at, we might say the following:

- “Homework should be banned because it interferes with effective learning. For example, students have to stay up late to finish their homework, and this makes them tired in class so they can’t pay attention.”
- “Poverty is harmful because when families are poor, they cannot regularly feed their children. For example, often poor families have to choose between paying their rent and buying food.”
- “The United Nations should be reformed because it is not effective now. For example, the U.N. is so disorganized that it can’t conduct effective peacekeeping operations, like the operation in Rwanda that failed because there weren’t enough troops and so many people died.”

There are, of course, other kinds of evidence. In the next issue of the newsletter, there will be an article about understanding and evaluating evidence. The purpose of this section is simply to review the ARE model for argument construction.
When Reasoning Goes Bad: Logical Fallacies

To be successful in debate, you will need to know the difference between good reasoning and bad reasoning. Sometimes reasons that seem to be solid are, upon closer inspection, flawed. The term “logical fallacy” refers to an incorrect conclusion that comes from faulty reasoning. Sometimes, people will call certain arguments “fallacious.” What they mean is that the reasoning for the argument is flawed. Although there are many logical fallacies (some lists contain many dozens), I will discuss five of the most common.

• The appeal to tradition. Sometimes speakers will justify their position in a debate by arguing that we should do something a certain way because we have always done that thing a certain way: “School uniforms are good because we have a tradition of having school uniforms.” To be sure, there are reasons why it might be good to preserve a tradition – for example, traditions in a school may help to build and maintain a healthy community, or create a sense of shared purpose, but simply saying that we should do something because we’ve always done it that way is not good reasoning. Consider that plenty of bad behaviors (holding slaves, denying women the right to vote, or even smoking) were at one time traditions in this country, but that didn’t mean that they were necessarily good ideas.

• The appeal to authority. Debaters often refer to sources in debates to prove their points. For example, to support the idea that we should not lower the driving age, you might point to a study from the Centers for Disease Control that showed that teenagers were 33% less likely to wear seatbelts in cars. That’s a good use of an authoritative source to support your argument. But if you simply said that teenagers were dangerous drivers, and Time magazine said so, then you’re not actually offering reasoning or evidence to support your point. In other words, just because someone said something, that doesn’t make it true. While it is often appropriate and even necessary to cite credible sources to prove a point, the appeal to authority becomes fallacious when it is a substitute for reasoning or when the cited authority isn’t actually an authority.

• The fallacy of false cause. This fallacy occurs when the speaker says that something happened, and then some-
thing else happened, so therefore the first thing caused the second thing. So, if you said: “The sun rises every time I get out of bed. Therefore, by getting out of bed, I make the sun rise,” that would obviously be arguing from a false cause. In Latin, this fallacy is called “post hoc, ergo propter hoc,” which means “after this, therefore because of this.” Order in time does not imply causality. Here’s a good – and funny – example. In The Simpsons, there is an episode where Homer says that Springfield’s new bear patrols are working because there aren’t any bears around. Lisa points out to him that this is faulty reasoning. She picks up a rock, and says: “By your logic, I could argue that this rock keeps away tigers.” Homer asks her to explain. Lisa says: “Well, you don’t see any tigers around, do you?” Sometimes, speakers will draw a faulty link between premises and a conclusion so that the link depends upon a causal connection that probably does not exist.

• The fallacy of composition. Often, what is true of a part of something is also true of the whole of something. For example, one member of a debate team may be smart, and every member of the debate team may also be smart. What is true of the part is true of the whole. But it is important to remember that what is true of the part is not necessarily true of the whole. Just because a dozen people in your school are great at math, it does not follow that all of the students at your school are great at math. Consider what you would say if a speaker said: “Atoms have no color. Humans are made up of atoms. Therefore, humans have no color.” What is true of the part is not necessarily true of the whole.

• Fallacy of division. The opposite of the fallacy of composition, the fallacy of division occurs when the conclusion of an argument depends on falsely extending a characteristic from the whole to its parts. In other words, just because something is true of the whole, it does not necessarily follow that this thing is true of its parts. You might read a story that says that the average American family has 2.3 children. Does this mean that the Jones family (an average American family) has exactly 2.3 children? What would it mean to have .3 of a child?

When you encounter faulty reasoning in a debate, you should point it out. The best way to do this is to reference the argument made by the other side and answer it by showing that it uses faulty reasoning. So, for example, you might say: “They say that the Patriot Act works because there haven’t been any terrorist attacks in this country recently. But this doesn’t necessarily prove that the Patriot Act works. Just because something happens after something else, that doesn’t prove the first thing causes the second thing. That’s like saying that waking up causes the sun to come up. Unless they can show some specific reasoning evidence to prove this point, this claim is unsupported and should be rejected.”

Knowing common logical fallacies can help you win more debates, because you’ll be better equipped to answer the points made by the other side and make sure your own reasoning is correct.

Further Reading

This is a good website for learning more about different errors in reasoning. It is clear and easy to use.

This website organizes logical fallacies into three categories: fallacies of presumption, fallacies of ambiguity, and fallacies of relevance. If you don’t know what those words mean, you should check this site out to find out. It’s got some fun examples of different errors, too!

The Fallacy Files: http://www.fallacyfiles.org/index.html
This website organizes examples and explanations of many common and obscure logical fallacies. It may be a little advanced for some students, but is a good place to expand your knowledge.

For Teachers: http://www.nd.edu/~fwriting/resources/active/09logicfalse.shtml
This site, maintained by a college teacher, contains good ideas for activities that can be scaled to work with middle school students.
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