

Propaganda Techniques and False Reasoning

- **Name Calling:** attaching a negative label to a person, group or idea that the speaker opposes. (e.g., “This bill is racist.”)
- **Glittering Generality:** attaching a positive label to a person, group or idea that the speaker endorses. (e.g., “That bill is democratic.”)
- **Transfer:** associating the topic with something the receiver approves (e.g., “A vote for that bill is a vote for America!”) or condemns (e.g., “A vote for that bill is a vote for representation!”)
- **Testimonial:** using the reputation of a person to gain endorsement (“The president of the United States supports this idea”) or rejection (“Adolf Hitler supported this idea”).
- **Plain Folks:** linking the source with the qualities of the receivers (e.g., “I am a middle-class American, just like you, and I would never support an idea that would harm the middle class”).
- **Card Stacking:** selecting only the evidence that supports the speaker’s cause, even if that falsifies or distorts that evidence (e.g., “No major magazine has been able to successfully criticize this proposal”).
- **Band Wagon:** using the notion that “everyone is doing it” in place of evidence and reasoning (e.g., “Everyone who is anyone has joined this club”).
- **Ad hominem attacks:** attacking the opponent’s integrity, intelligence or lifestyle, and ignores the opponent’s argument. (e.g., “Ms. Jones’s irrational claims are clearly without reason—not a surprising fact at all considering her recent admission of marital infidelity”).
- **Ad populum commentary:** appealing to popular opinion without addressing the specifics. (e.g., “Every American worth his oath of allegiance knows that Mr. Whitmore’s investigation defied commonly accepted democratic principles”).
- **Post hoc ergo propter hoc reasoning:** incorrectly assuming that one even caused another. (e.g., “The Vietnam War escalated out of control in the mid-1960s. Clearly, America lost its resolve to suppress the expansion of Communism in South-east Asia because of President Kennedy’s assassination in 1963”).
- **Non sequitars:** stating an idea that does not follow from the original premise. (e.g., “George Bernard Shaw was a prolific playwright dedicated to his writing. No wonder he never married”).
- **Red herrings:** raising unrelated points to advance the argument. (e.g., “The ancient Greeks were a polytheistic people; therefore, we should take Plato’s *Republic* and Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* with a grain of salt”).
- **Absolutes:** using superlatives to advance a point. (e.g., “Nobody really expects a human being to land on Mars someday”).

- **Hasty generalizations:** using data carelessly by incorrectly generalizing about specific data. (e.g., “A majority of Democratic and Republican congressional leaders oppose stem cell research; therefore, this scientific application has no popular appeal and deserves no place in the United States”).

Unethical language use

Often called language fallacies, these techniques are nearly always used intentionally. The most common are the following.

- **Equivocation:** Words can, and often are, ambiguous. Many words have more than one meaning. Equivocation refers to using one or both meanings of a word and then deliberately confusing the two in the audience’s mind. For example, the word “free” is tossed about quite a bit by advertisers, but does it really mean without cost? When you purchase that big bottle of shampoo that claims you are getting “12 more ounces free!” are you really getting it free? When a press release states that a senior executive has “resigned,” does it mean he has quit or that he was fired? In fact, the word “resign” has become something of euphemism in business and government for being asked to leave.
- **Amphiboly:** This is the use of ambiguous sentence structure or grammar to mislead. For example, “new and improved” products imply that there is a logical comparison to be made. However, what are these products “newness” and state of improvement being compared to? How about, “X cereal: part of a nutritional breakfast”? What part? Is it nutritional without the other parts? What are the other parts? And if something only “helps” you obtain whiter teeth, what else plays a part?
- **Emotive language:** This is the use of emotionally charged words to shift response from the argument itself to the images invoked by these words. This is a bit like transfer except that it uses words instead of images. Think of the ads that use words such as “freedom,” “miracle,” “powerful,” “younger looking.” Or the news release that refers to a product as “revolutionary,” or a person as “dynamic.” When we use these words, we’ve strayed from fact to opinion.