The AP will test whether you understand logical fallacies. However, you are unlikely to be tested on the exact terms for the different fallacies.

THE RHETORICAL FALLACY TRAP

Have you ever seen commercials or billboard ads showing a happy, carefree crowd walking on a blissful beach at a 5-star resort? Don't they always seem to be enjoying a wonderful vacation, enticing you to want to also take a vacation at that same resort?

Ads like this rely on rhetorical fallacy: a way to persuade you to buy into what they are selling. They don't explain the advantages of the resort. Instead, they promote the resort by showcasing a fun-loving couple on the beach. The people in the ad might not be anything like you; their lives might be completely different from yours. Who's to say your experience would be the same if you were to visit the same resort? This is a prime example of how rhetorical fallacy is used in everyday life.

A rhetorical fallacy is basically faulty reasoning leading to a conclusion the advertiser, author, or speaker wants you to make. They pop up often—in ads, in statements by politicians, in appeals from charities, in arguments from your own friends and family. Skilled communicators such as political speech writers use them deliberately. Others use them unconsciously—the conclusion seems so obvious to them that "everybody else has one" sounds like irrefutable evidence. You might have used rhetorical fallacies subconsciously too.

Rhetorical fallacies also pop up on the AP English Language and Composition Exam, since this test covers how language works and how it is used. A rhetorical fallacy uses (or rather, *mis*-uses) language in order to trick you into accepting the author's conclusion. This conclusion appears to be truth at first, but the evidence supporting it crumbles when your active reading or listening skills kick in. You then ask yourself, "*why* should I do or believe this?".

> On the test, you might find rhetorical fallacies lurking in the passages for the multiple-choice questions or in the sources provided for the synthesis and analysis essays. You need to be able to recognize them so you won't be led astray in your answers. You also need to avoid them in your own essays.

Spotting and Avoiding Rhetorical Fallacies

Think of a rhetorical fallacy as "fake evidence." It seems to support a conclusion that the author wants the reader to accept, but—on close examination—it doesn't really lead to that conclusion.

You can identify rhetorical fallacies (and avoid them in your own work) by following this process:

1. Identify the conclusion. What position does the author want you to accept? What action does the author want you to take? What inference does he or she want you to draw?

2. Identify the evidence. How does the author lead you to that conclusion? What does the author present as evidence that the conclusion is correct?

3. Examine the evidence. Is it
    a. relevant to the conclusion?
    b. accurate?
    c. credible?
    d. logical?
    e. complete?

If it's not, then you've likely encountered a rhetorical fallacy.

Common Rhetorical Fallacies

Let's look at some common types of rhetorical fallacies so you can understand how they try to mislead you. The name of each specific fallacy is given, but what's most important for the exam is being able to recognize faulty reasoning when you see it, and avoiding it in the essays you write.

Emphasizing the Person

In this class of rhetorical fallacies, the evidence focuses on the person who supports a conclusion, not on the merits of the conclusion itself.

***Ad Populum* or "bandwagon":** A certain political candidate is ahead in the polls. Since most people are going to vote for him, you should too. Otherwise you'll just be wasting your vote.

The happy crowd on the beach described at the beginning of this chapter is another instance of the "bandwagon" fallacy. All of these people are having a great vacation at this resort; you should go there, and you'll have fun too.

The conclusion is an action the author (or the advertiser) wants you to take—vote for this candidate, book a vacation at this resort. No support is provided to explain *why* the candidate is the best choice, or *why* the resort is better than others. The very thin evidence is only that others are doing it.

Argument from Authority: Dr. X recommends this medication to his patients, or well-known musician Y always drives this brand of car. Are they being paid by the manufacturers to endorse those products, or do the products have attributes that really make them superior? You'll never know. This rhetorical fallacy focuses solely on the credentials or fame of the person recommending the product, without saying anything about the product itself.

And watch those credentials—is Dr. X really a recognized specialist in the illness the medication is intended to treat? What does musician Y know about cars?

You're My Hero—or Not

"Argument from Authority" is really *"Ad Hominum"* turned upside down.

Ad Hominem: This rhetorical fallacy turns to the other side of the coin and points out negative characteristics of the person who promotes an idea or action. By implication, the action is as negative as the person who endorses it. The mayor was caught plagiarizing an essay in college and was accused of embezzlement by a former employer. Therefore, his claim that municipal taxes must increase to cover necessary road repairs has to be a lie and an attempt to steal taxpayers' money. Nothing is said about the actual condition of the roads.

Dogmatism: The conclusion must be correct because the author or speaker says it is and she can't possibly be wrong. After all, she is an internationally recognized authority on the subject, or she is the CEO of the most profitable company on the planet. She wouldn't have risen to that position if she were ever wrong. No other reasons are presented to support the conclusion, and no opposing viewpoints are even considered.

Presenting Only Part of the Truth

Equivocation: This type of fallacy leaves out facts that a reader or listener would need in order to make a thorough assessment of the conclusion. Equivocation often relies on ambiguous definitions of words.

For example, your home insurer might say that for an extra $50 premium, you'll be covered for $100,000 in water damage. Look at the "definitions" section of your policy, though, and you might see that the insurer considers "water damage" to be damage caused by a sewer backup. "Overland flooding" or "ice dams on roof" are separate categories that are not covered. You probably assumed those events would all result in "water damage," and the insurer is counting on that to lead you to the conclusion that it's worth spending the extra $50.

> In the movie *Pink Panther,* Inspector Clouseau enters a quaint European hotel and, upon spying a cute little dog, asks the owner, "Does your dog bite?" The manager responds, "No," and Clouseau attempts to pet the dog, which growls and bites him. "You told me that your dog does not bite!" exclaims Clouseau. "That's not my dog," responds the owner.

Sentimental Appeals: Charities often use this tactic when they ask for donations. Poor, starving children living in deplorable surroundings, or clear-cut hillsides that were once covered by beautiful forests—these scenes appeal to your emotions rather than your intellect. This rhetorical fallacy omits rational explanations about why the charity deserves your donation. What has it achieved recently to right the wrong it presents? How much of your donation is used for its programs, and how much goes into executive salaries or "team-building" events? How much is it spending in order to raise the donations it's seeking?

Arousing Fear

Slippery Slope: It may seem minor now, but the end result will inevitably be a catastrophe. According to this rhetorical fallacy, if you eat at a fast-food takeout once, pretty soon you'll never want to eat healthy, nourishing home-cooked meals again. Therefore, you can never allow yourself to eat at a fast-food takeout, not even once. The author uses the fear of the disaster waiting at the bottom of the slippery slope to trick the reader into agreeing that the first action must not be allowed to occur.

Scare Tactics: Here the speaker or author is trying to frighten you into agreeing with him. If you don't commit to a two-year contract, your monthly rate won't be protected and prices are going to go through the roof in the next couple of years. Who says? On what evidence does he make that prediction?

Weakening an Opposing Argument

These rhetorical fallacies present an opposing view in such a weak light that almost nobody would agree with it. Readers would, instead, accept the author's apparently stronger conclusion.

Red Herring: Instead of addressing the key issues of an opposing argument, a red herring fallacy focuses attention on an insignificant or irrelevant factor. For instance, you should avoid eating green vegetables (the conclusion) because of the risk of salmonella contamination (the red herring). This fallacy avoids the main points of the opposing argument in favor of green vegetables (such as nutritional content and health benefits).

Straw Man: The writer creates a straw man—something that's easy to knock down and tear apart—as the opposing viewpoint. The straw man could be either an oversimplification of an opponent's position, or a completely fictitious argument. In contrast, the writer's conclusion seems strong and reasonable.

For instance, suppose the mayor wants taxpayers to fund a new bridge that will lead directly to a large new subdivision. People who oppose this expense, she says, don't believe the new bridge is necessary because subdivision residents can simply spend an extra half hour driving downtown, across the existing bridge and back up the other side of the river to the new subdivision. That opposing viewpoint is pretty easy to knock down if you live, work, or shop in the new subdivision, so of course you favor a new bridge.

Making Inaccurate Connections

Faulty analogy: One thing is compared with a second thing, but the comparison is exaggerated or misleading or unreasonable. Nevertheless, that comparison colors the reader's impression of the first thing. "Hiking on that trail is like descending into a dungeon of horrors from which you might never return." Perhaps it's just a challenging trail that leads through thick woods and would give you a good workout. But not many people would try it after hearing the speaker's comparison.

Reverse Causation

Causal arguments are often faulty because the reverse causation is equally plausible. For example, "Eating too much chocolate can make you depressed." Well, it's just as likely that depressed people might feel the urge to eat too much chocolate. If the author says "A caused B," ask yourself, "Is it also possible that B caused A?"

Faulty causality (also called ***Post hoc ergo propter hoc***)**:** This type of fallacy assumes that because one event happened shortly before another, the first event must have caused the second. (That's what the long Latin name refers to, by the way). "She wore her old Brand X runners instead of her new Brand Y runners, therefore she lost the race." Well, maybe. But perhaps she lost the race because she hadn't trained sufficiently, or because her knee was sore that day, or because others were simply faster. No evidence is presented to prove that the first event caused the second.

Twisting the Language

Begging the Question: In this rhetorical fallacy, an assumption which is not proven is used as evidence that the conclusion is correct. For instance, "high-altitude skiing is such a dangerous sport (the evidence) that no one under the age of 18 should be allowed to do it (the conclusion)." That might be a logical argument if the writer had proven—with statistics or with specific examples—that high-altitude skiing is dangerous for young people in particular. But he doesn't. He states that assumption as if it were a proven fact and then uses the assumption to prove his conclusion.

Circular Argument: This fallacy says essentially the same thing in both the conclusion and in the evidence that allegedly supports it. For example, someone might say that Sally cares about other people (the conclusion) because she is always willing to help them (the evidence). Someone who is always willing to help others obviously cares about them. Both the conclusion and the evidence describe the same idea. If the speaker had given specific examples of times when Sally helped someone else, and other actions that show she cares about others, he would have provided more credible proof for his conclusion.

Rhetorical fallacies in this category can be tough to spot, particularly when you're reading quickly under pressure. You need keen active reading skills to be able to say, "wait a minute, how do you know that piece of evidence is true?" or "didn't your evidence and your conclusion just say the same thing in different words?".

Mismatch Between Evidence and Conclusion

Missing the point: The author offers evidence that supports a conclusion—it's just not the same conclusion that the author reaches. Imagine a presenter with gorgeous slides of meadows and grasslands in the northern plains, dense forests and subarctic tundra—the preferred habitats of grizzly bears. She cites research that reveals the grizzly population is declining and being pushed into smaller and smaller territories as humans take over the bears' habitats for their own uses. As a result, she continues, we should experiment with relocating small groups of grizzlies to see if they can adapt to habitats where they won't get so much competition from humans for use of the land. She suggests wetlands and high up on western mountains.

Her evidence does support the conclusions that we should take steps to protect the remaining grizzly population and should be more conscious of the impact our land use has on other creatures. However, it doesn't lead to a radical relocation scheme that ignores factors such as food sources, climate, and the bears' likely reaction.

Non Sequitur: This Latin term means, "it doesn't follow." In this rhetorical fallacy, the conclusion is not logically related to the evidence that preceded it. "Violent crime in this city has increased by 10 percent year over year for the past five years. Adding to the police force hasn't improved the situation. Therefore, we should build more private schools."

What do private schools have to do with the violent crime rate? Perhaps more than half of violent crimes occur around schools, private schools have the money for much better security measures, and the existing private schools all have long waiting lists. The author doesn't explain that, though; he has left serious gaps in the connection between his evidence and his conclusion.

It's easy to fall into this fallacy in your own work when the conclusion seems obvious to you. Think about your readers, though—would they need a few more steps before they could follow you to your conclusion?

Unstated Assumptions

Conclusions in this class of rhetorical fallacies rest on assumptions that the author doesn't even state, let alone prove. These, too, can be tough to spot in a pressure-cooker exam setting.

False Dichotomy: This rhetorical fallacy assumes a black-and-white world in which there is no middle ground, no other alternative. "If we don't launch a preemptive attack and destroy the enemy first, they will destroy us." No consideration is given to other possibilities, such as a diplomatic solution or a small-scale limited strike.

Hasty Generalization: Here the author or speaker assumes that a limited experience foreshadows the entire experience. The result is insufficient evidence to support the conclusion. "I could tell from the first few minutes that the movie was going to be unbearably boring, so I left rather than waste any more of my time." Maybe the director deliberately starts off slowly in order to intensify viewers' reactions to the terrifying monster that is about to appear.

Non-testable hypothesis: In this rhetorical fallacy, anything that has not been proven false is assumed to be true; the author doesn't need to prove it's true. For example, suppose an environmental group claims that average temperatures across the entire North American continent would fall by 1° Celsius if we switched completely to renewable energy. Since we have never abandoned fossil fuels entirely, it's impossible to prove that the group's claim is false. Therefore, the argument assumes it must be true.

Drill—Catch the Rhetorical Fallacies

The following examples are similar to parts of passages you might encounter in the multiple-choice section of the AP English Language and Composition Exam, or to parts of the sources given in the essay questions. Before you read the explanation that follows each selection, try to identify how the author is misleading you into reaching the conclusion he or she wants you to accept. Remember to look for the claim or action or belief that the author is endorsing. Then find and assess the evidence the author presents. And think about how your answer on the exam might be different depending on whether you noticed the rhetorical fallacy or not.

(Hint: One example does not contain a rhetorical fallacy. See if you can identify that one too.)

In this selection, a detective is questioning a woman in order to gather evidence about a crime he is investigating.

> ... it is on me that all this weight lies. If the police begin investigations they come close upon the fact that I went there to meet a man whom my husband has forbidden me to meet. Any little turn of evidence that involves me, any little accident that obliges me to admit it, and I am lost,"—her voice thrilled and pleaded.
>
> "It is you who are lost," he echoed dully. "I can understand how you feel. If I can ease your burden or lessen the anxiety you suffer from, you may depend upon me, Mrs. Wilder. This matter is a dark road where I, too, walk blind, not knowing the path I follow, but, at least, I can give you my word that under no circumstances shall I be led to mention your name. You can be sure of that, Mrs. Wilder. If I can add your trouble to my own burden I shall not feel its weight, ...
>
> Excerpt from *The Pointing Man: A Burmese Mystery* by Marjorie Douie, 1920

Now suppose a multiple-choice question asks:

> What technique does the detective use to try to gain Mrs. Wilder's confidence?
>
> (A) Deceit
> (B) Sympathy
> (C) Threats
> (D) Empathy
> (E) Begging

What conclusion is Mrs. Wilder supposed to reach?—that it's safe to answer the detective's questions. He won't tell anyone who gave him the information, so Mr. Wilder won't find out that his wife met the forbidden man. What evidence does the detective offer to support that conclusion? None. Mrs. Wilder can count on

him keeping her name out of the investigation because she can depend on him (circular argument). She should believe him because he understands how she feels (non-testable hypothesis) and because he says she can (dogmatism).

Choices (C) and (E) are clearly not supported in the passage. If you didn't notice the rhetorical fallacies, though, you might be tempted to choose (D) or perhaps (B), both of which are incorrect. If you spotted the faulty evidence, you'd know the correct choice is (A). The detective's only objective is to get answers to his questions, and he'll tell this frightened woman whatever she needs to hear before she'll answer them.

This paragraph appears in "Maintenance and Safety of Hybrid and Plug-In Electric Vehicles," a resource from the U.S. Department of Energy's Vehicle Technologies Office. It is the type of source you might find in the synthesis essay question.

> **Safety Requirements**
>
> HEVs [hybrid electric vehicles], PHEVs [plug-in hybrid electric vehicles], and EVs [all-electric vehicles] have high-voltage electrical systems that typically range from 100 to 600 volts. Their battery packs are encased in sealed shells and meet testing standards that subject batteries to conditions such as overcharge, vibration, extreme temperatures, short circuit, humidity, fire, collision, and water immersion. Manufacturers design these vehicles with insulated high-voltage lines and safety features that deactivate the electrical system when they detect a collision or short circuit. EVs tend to have a lower center of gravity than conventional vehicles, making them more stable and less likely to roll over.

Suppose the synthesis prompt asked you to defend, challenge, or qualify the claim that electric vehicles are unsafe. How would you evaluate this excerpt when you're choosing sources for your essay? Is it a strong, reliable source, or does it contain faulty reasoning that misleads you into accepting a conclusion?

Start by identifying the conclusion: electric vehicles are safer than you might think because of the safety features designers have built into them. Now what evidence does the author give to support that conclusion? The selection lists specific examples of safety features (such as sealed cases and automatic shutoff) intended to shield people from the dangers of high voltage. It also describes a design feature (low center of gravity) that helps prevent instability and rollovers. And it acknowledges the high voltage instead of trying to hide the danger.

This author gives relevant, specific, logical evidence supporting the conclusion, and does not resort to rhetorical fallacies. This would be a good choice as one of your sources.

The following excerpt from a mobile app's End User License Agreement (EULA) illustrates the type of source you might see in the analysis essay question, for which you're asked to identify the strategies an author uses to achieve his or her purpose.

> Bazaar Bonanza is a free, powerful, user-friendly tool to get you to the best deals on things that will make your life easier, more fulfilling and just plain more fun. Millions of users are saving money and time on products they want and need with Bazaar Bonanza. We take your privacy very seriously, and are committed to providing you with choice and transparency. We'd like you to know about the benefits you'll gain when you create an account and download our app.
>
> In order to make sure you never miss a great deal, we track your location and maintain a database of your favorite places and the times and days you usually visit them. We also access your contacts, your messages and your emails because we know you'll want to share amazing bargains with your friends and family members. Since you'll want to return to the same shops that offered outstanding deals in the past, we track and store data about all of the purchases you make via a mobile payment service. Over time, we build a complete profile of your travel and shopping habits. So we can provide you with an ever-expanding universe of wonderful products and services at unbelievable prices, we share your profile with other companies that may be of interest to you. We also give those companies access to your reviews and endorsements so they can share them with other users who may be looking for similar deals.

What rhetorical strategies is this author using to achieve her purpose of gaining new users? Are rhetorical fallacies among those strategies?

This excerpt is full of rhetorical fallacies. First is the bandwagon ("millions of users") and then dogmatism—there's no evidence that the company values the privacy of its users or that it is offering them any choice. It's true because the company says it's true. The commitment to transparency is actually well supported, though, in the extensive list of data the company collects and descriptions of what it does with that data. Next comes a scare tactic (missing a great deal). Then there are a few *non sequiturs*—for instance, if you want to share information about bargains with your friends, why does it follow that the app needs access to your contacts and messages? Throughout the entire excerpt is the unstated assumption that your desire to find a deal outweighs your desire to protect your personal information.

This is the type of prompt you might see in the argument essay question:

> In order to save time, reduce costs, and avoid security risks, many companies are encouraging their employees to substitute technology (such as video conferencing) for business trips that can involve long absences, expensive travel, and potentially dangerous locations. In contrast, some executives and sales professionals claim there's no substitute for the personal relationships they can develop through meeting someone face to face or attending an industry event in person. Political leaders often seem to agree, traveling halfway around the world for a meeting that might last only an hour or two.

> Think about the trade-off between savings and security on the one hand, and the gains that can result from an in-person meeting on the other. Then write an essay explaining your position on whether travel is worth the costs and risks. Use appropriate evidence from your reading, experience, or observations to support your argument.

Before you read the suggestions below, consider what position you would take on this question. Then think about the conclusions you'll need to persuade readers so they can follow your argument and eventually agree with it.

You could argue for using technology, for in-person travel or—most likely in this case—for a combination of the two. You might say, for example, that travel is justified for an initial meeting or two in order to establish a personal relationship, but after that, little more would be gained from the expense and potential risks of traveling to meet in person. Electronic communication or phone calls would serve the purpose.

To lead readers to agree with this argument, you'll need to get them to concede that travel is expensive, time-consuming, and depending on the destination, can be dangerous. They'll have to acknowledge the importance of saving money, saving time, and avoiding risks. They also need to accept that an in-person relationship can form a foundation that leads to a better outcome in later long-distance dealings.

Now what evidence can you use to support each of those conclusions? And how can you avoid rhetorical fallacies in presenting that evidence? This prompt is particularly vulnerable to fallacies that emphasize the person or group instead of the merits of an idea, to fallacies that arouse fear, and to mismatches between the evidence and the conclusion.

Under the time pressure of the exam, you won't have time to do a thorough assessment of your evidence for each conclusion. But as you're writing, you can ask yourself if you're really addressing the conclusion itself, or only the people who would advocate that course of action. Are you trying to frighten readers by describing the consequences that might result from not following your recommendation? Have you left any gaps in the evidence that leads to your conclusion? Are you covering the key issues and most relevant aspects of the topic?

Don't let clever rhetorical fallacies lead you down the wrong path!

Rhetorical fallacies can be very convincing. They're also easy errors to make in your own writing, particularly when you have a strong opinion about a subject, when you're making broad claims or when you're experiencing stress during an exam. By training yourself to think in terms of relevant, complete, logically presented evidence, you can avoid falling into the trap of believing—or creating—rhetorical fallacies.

REFLECT

Respond to the following questions:

- Do you understand how rhetorical fallacies work? How they can trick people?
- Are there any types of rhetorical fallacies that you are particularly susceptible to believing?
- Are there any types of rhetorical fallacies that you tend to use automatically when you're trying to convince a listener or reader to agree with your argument?
- What are the characteristics of valid evidence?
- What techniques could you use to avoid rhetorical fallacies in your own work?
- How can you avoid rhetorical fallacies when you're writing essays under the time pressure of the AP English Language and Composition Exam?
- For which topics in this chapter do you feel you need more practice or more examples?