

The Toulmin system is not foolproof, but it does provide a model for argumentation, and it is particularly useful for making claims about popular culture texts or any text for which there is no clear “right” or “wrong” answer.

Try to avoid fallacies.

Fallacies are, literally, falsities, gaps, and errors in judgment. Sometimes called “logical fallacies,” these missteps are mistakes of logic, and they have been around for centuries. We are all guilty of falling into the fallacy trap now and then, but avoid that trap if possible. Here are a few of the most common:

- **The Straw Man fallacy:** when the writer sets up a fake argument or a “straw man” (an argument that doesn’t really exist), only to refute it later.
- **The ad hominem fallacy:** Latin for “to the man,” this fallacy occurs when a writer attacks a person and not an argument. When a politician accuses his detractors of personal attacks in an attempt to avoid the real issues, he is claiming that his opponents are making *ad hominem* assertions.
- **The hasty generalization:** when a writer jumps to a quick and easy conclusion without thinking through the leap logically. Using an earlier example, a hasty generalization would occur if one made an argument that Parker Posey appeared in *every* independent movie in the 1990s.
- **The post hoc ergo propter hoc fallacy:** Latin for “after the fact therefore because of the fact,” this fallacy is a favorite among beginning writers. Literally, it means that because X comes after Y, Y must have caused X. In other words, it is a faulty cause and effect relationship. Let’s say someone observes that teen violence seems to be on the rise. This person also is beginning to notice more and more video games at the local video store. The *post hoc* fallacy would occur when this person concluded that the rise in teen violence was *because* of the increased video games.
- **The vague generality:** Also a favorite among college students, the fallacy of generalization takes place when a writer makes sweeping claims about a group but provides no specific detail or evidence to back up his claim. This can happen on a micro level with an overuse of the passive voice (“it is agreed that . . .” or “it is assumed that . . .”) that does not attribute responsibility. It happens on a macro level when a writer makes a broad generalization about a group of people, like immigrants, lesbians, Republicans, Jews, professors, or students. In some ways, this fallacy is the cause of racism as it assumes that behavior (or imagined behavior) of one person is shared or mimicked by an entire group. This is a dangerous strategy.
- **The non sequitur fallacy:** This is not a particularly common fallacy, but it is still useful to know. Latin for “it does not follow,” a non sequitur is a fallacy of conclusion, like a faulty assumption. An example would be, “No woman I know talks about wanting a baby, therefore, there can’t be very many women in the world who want babies.”