

# National High School Ethics Bowl Arguments and Logical Fallacies

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High School Ethics Bowl is an event in which high school students gather to discuss ethical issues and compete in offering arguments for the positions they take. As a judge, your job is to assess the competitors' ability to offer articulate, well-informed, and reasonable arguments. This handout is meant to provide a brief summary of what makes an argument reasonable or unreasonable.

## Arguments and Logical Fallacies

In each round, the presenting team will attempt to make arguments in order to establish a position with regards to an ethical issue. An argument is made up of premises (which provide evidence or reasons in favor of a position) and a conclusion (the claim being established by the premises). A reasonable argument:

1. has strong, well supported premises that we have good reason to think are true,
2. has a conclusion that follows logically from the premises, and
3. is relevant to the ethical question at issue.

Logical fallacies are defects that weaken arguments. Here is a list of some of the most common fallacies:

### Appeal to Tradition

Definition: An argument appeals to tradition when it presumes that something is right or wrong just because we have always taken it to be right or wrong.

Example: Eating meat is morally permissible because it's what we've always done.

Analysis: This argument assumes that the fact that we have always eaten meat means that it is morally permissible to eat meat. However, it ignores the possibility that it may have always been morally wrong to eat meat, or that certain facts about our present day circumstances now make eating meat wrong, even if it wasn't wrong historically.

### Begging the Question

Definition: An argument begs the question when it assumes the truth of the very thing that it is trying to prove.

Example: We ought donate to charity because helping people in times of need is the right thing to do.

Analysis: This argument contains a conclusion (“We ought to donate to charity”) and a premise (“helping people in times of need is the right thing to do”). When we look at the conclusion and premise, however, we see that they say basically the exact same thing. This means that the premise, which is meant to support the conclusion, actually implicitly assumes the truth of the conclusion.

### **False Dichotomy**

Definition: A false dichotomy argument is set up to suggest that there are only two options available in a given situation. One option is then eliminated, so it seems that we must accept the other option. However, the argument omits the fact that there are actually more than two options available.

Example: Either you’re against physician-assisted suicide or you’re for the unrestricted legalization of physician-assisted suicide. Since legalizing unrestricted physician-assisted suicide will have awful consequences, we should be against the legalization of physician-suicide.

Analysis: This argument presents a false dichotomy because it fails to acknowledge a third option: legalizing physician-assisted suicide in only certain types of cases.

### **Faulty Analogy**

Definition: Many arguments rely on analogies. An analogy is faulty when it involves the comparison of two things that aren’t actually alike, or aren’t alike in the relevant respect.

Example: Marijuana is like oregano insofar as it is a green, leafy plant. Since it would be ridiculous to criminalize the consumption of oregano, it is equally ridiculous to criminalize the consumption of marijuana.

Analysis: Even though marijuana and oregano are alike in some respects, these are not the respects that are at issue when we consider whether we ought to legalize the sale of marijuana.

### **Appeal to Authority**

Definition: It is often perfectly appropriate to strengthen an argument by appealing to a legitimate and relevant authority on the issue. We commit a fallacy, however, when we either appeal to an illegitimate authority or when we appeal to an authority simply to impress our audience.

Example: Immanuel Kant said that we should never treat people merely as a means to our ends. By buying someone’s kidney, you are using them merely as a means to your end. Therefore, it is morally impermissible to buy and sell organs.

Analysis: This argument presupposes that Immanuel Kant was right to think that we should never use people merely as means to our ends. However, further argument is

required to establish the truth of that claim.

### **Slippery Slope**

Definition: A slippery slope argument assumes that some action will inevitably lead to a (typically problematic) chain of events. In reality, however, there is not sufficient evidence to prove that this chain will actually result.

Example: Any sort of gun control law will invariably lead to our second amendment right to bear arms being taken away. So, if you're in support of the second amendment, you ought to be against all gun control laws.

Analysis: This argument assumes that there is a 'slippery slope' between gun control laws and the elimination of the second amendment, without offering any argument in support of claim.