

4.4.6: Speaking Ethically and Avoiding Fallacies

Learning Objectives

1. Demonstrate the importance of ethics as part of the persuasion process.
2. Identify and provide examples of eight common fallacies in persuasive speaking.

What comes to mind when you think of speaking to persuade? Perhaps the idea of persuasion may bring to mind propaganda and issues of manipulation, deception, intentional bias, bribery, and even coercion. Each element relates to persuasion, but in distinct ways. In a democratic society, we would hope that our Bill of Rights is intact and validated, and that we would support the exercise of freedom to discuss, consider and debate issues when considering change. We can recognize that each of these elements in some ways has a negative connotation associated with it. Why do you think that deceiving your audience, bribing a judge, or coercing people to do something against their wishes is wrong? These tactics violate our sense of fairness, freedom, and ethics.

Manipulation involves the management of facts, ideas or points of view to play upon inherent insecurities or emotional appeals to one's own advantage. Your audience expects you to treat them with respect, and deliberately manipulating them by means of fear, guilt, duty, or a relationship is unethical. In the same way, deception involves the use of lies, partial truths, or the omission of relevant information to deceive your audience. No one likes to be lied to, or made to believe something that is not true. Deception can involve intentional bias, or the selection of information to support your position while framing negatively any information that might challenge your belief.

Bribery involves the giving of something in return for an expected favor, consideration, or privilege. It circumvents the normal protocol for personal gain, and again is a strategy that misleads your audience. Coercion is the use of power to compel action. You make someone do something they would not choose to do freely. You might threaten punishment, and people may go along with you while the "stick" is present, but once the threat is removed, they will revert to their previous position, often with new antagonism toward the person or agency that coerced them. While you may raise the issue that the ends justify the means, and you are "doing it for the audience's own good," recognize the unethical nature of coercion.

As Martin Luther King Jr. stated in his advocacy of nonviolent resistance, two wrongs do not make a right. They are just two wrongs and violate the ethics that contribute to community and healthy relationships. Each issue certainly relates to persuasion, but you as the speaker should be aware of each in order to present an ethical persuasive speech. Learn to recognize when others try to use these tactics on you, and know that your audience will be watching to see if you try any of these strategies on them.

Eleven Points for Speaking Ethically

In his book *Ethics in Human Communication* (Johannesen, R., 1996), Richard Johannesen offers eleven points to consider when speaking to persuade. His main points reiterate many of the points across this chapter and should be kept in mind as you prepare, and present, your persuasive message.

Do not:

- use false, fabricated, misrepresented, distorted or irrelevant evidence to support arguments or claims.
- intentionally use unsupported, misleading, or illogical reasoning.
- represent yourself as informed or an "expert" on a subject when you are not.
- use irrelevant appeals to divert attention from the issue at hand.
- ask your audience to link your idea or proposal to emotion-laden values, motives, or goals to which it is actually not related.
- deceive your audience by concealing your real purpose, by concealing self-interest, by concealing the group you represent, or by concealing your position as an advocate of a viewpoint.
- distort, hide, or misrepresent the number, scope, intensity, or undesirable features of consequences or effects.
- use "emotional appeals" that lack a supporting basis of evidence or reasoning.
- oversimplify complex, gradation-laden situations into simplistic, two-valued, either-or, polar views or choices.
- pretend certainty where tentativeness and degrees of probability would be more accurate.
- advocate something which you yourself do not believe in.

Aristotle said the mark of a good person, well spoken was a clear command of the faculty of observing in any given case the available means of persuasion. He discussed the idea of perceiving the many points of view related to a topic, and their thoughtful

consideration. While it's important to be able to perceive the complexity of a case, you are not asked to be a lawyer defending a client.

In your speech to persuade, consider honesty and integrity as you assemble your arguments. Your audience will appreciate your thoughtful consideration of more than one view, your understanding of the complexity, and you will build your ethos, or credibility, as you present your document. Be careful not to stretch the facts, or assemble them only to prove yourself, and instead prove the argument on its own merits. Deception, coercion, intentional bias, manipulation and bribery should have no place in your speech to persuade.

Avoiding Fallacies

Fallacies are another way of saying false logic. These rhetorical tricks deceive your audience with their style, drama, or pattern, but add little to your speech in terms of substance and can actually detract from your effectiveness. There are several techniques or “tricks” that allow the speaker to rely on style without offering substantive argument, to obscure the central message, or twist the facts to their own gain. Here we will examine the eight classical fallacies. You may note that some of them relate to the ethical cautions listed earlier in this section. Eight common fallacies are presented in Table 4.4.6.5 Learn to recognize these fallacies so they can't be used against you, and so that you can avoid using them with your audience.

Table 4.4.6.5: Fallacies

Fallacy	Definition	Example
1. Red Herring	Any diversion intended to distract attention from the main issue, particularly by relating the issue to a common fear.	It's not just about the death penalty; it's about the victims and their rights. You wouldn't want to be a victim, but if you were, you'd want justice.
2. Straw Man	A weak argument set up to be easily refuted, distracting attention from stronger arguments	What if we released criminals who commit murder after just a few years of rehabilitation? Think of how unsafe our streets would be then!
3. Begging the Question	Claiming the truth of the very matter in question, as if it were already an obvious conclusion.	We know that they will be released and unleashed on society to repeat their crimes again and again.
4. Circular Argument	The proposition is used to prove itself. Assumes the very thing it aims to prove. Related to begging the question.	Once a killer, always a killer.
5. Ad Populum	Appeals to a common belief of some people, often prejudicial, and states everyone holds this belief. Also called the Bandwagon Fallacy, as people “jump on the bandwagon” of a perceived popular view.	Most people would prefer to get rid of a few “bad apples” and keep our streets safe.
6. Ad Hominem	“Argument against the man” instead of against his message. Stating that someone's argument is wrong solely because of something about the person rather than about the argument itself.	Our representative is a drunk and philanderer. How can we trust him on the issues of safety and family?
7. Non Sequitur	“It does not follow.” The conclusion does not follow from the premises. They are not related.	Since the liberal antiwar demonstrations of the 1960s, we've seen an increase in convicts who got let off death row.

Fallacy	Definition	Example
8. Post Hoc Ergo Propter Hoc	“After this, therefore because of this,” also called a coincidental correlation. It tries to establish a cause-and-effect relationship where only a correlation exists.	Violent death rates went down once they started publicizing executions.

Avoid false logic and make a strong case or argument for your proposition. Finally, here is a five-step motivational checklist to keep in mind as you bring it all together:

1. Get their attention
2. Identify the need
3. Satisfy the need
4. Present a vision or solution
5. Take action

This simple organizational pattern can help you focus on the basic elements of a persuasive message when time is short and your performance is critical.

Key Takeaway

Speaking to persuade should not involve manipulation, coercion, false logic, or other unethical techniques.

Exercises

1. Can persuasion be ethical? Why or why not? Discuss your opinion with a classmate.
2. Select a persuasive article or video from a Web site that you feel uses unethical techniques to persuade the audience. What techniques are being used? What makes them unethical? Discuss your findings with your classmates.
3. Find an example of a particularly effective scene where a character in your favorite television program is persuaded to believe or do something. Write a two- to three-paragraph description of the scene and why it was effective. Share and compare with classmates.
4. Find an example of a particularly ineffective scene where a character in your favorite television program is not persuaded to believe or do something. Write a two- to three-paragraph description of the scene and why it was ineffective. Share and compare with classmates.
5. Find an example of a fallacy in an advertisement and share it with the class.
6. Find an example of an effective argument in an advertisement and share it with the class.
7. Write a two- to three-paragraph description of a persuasive message that caused you to believe or do something. Share and compare your description with classmates.

References

Johannesen, R. (1996). *Ethics in human communication* (4th ed.). Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press.

4.4.6: Speaking Ethically and Avoiding Fallacies is shared under a CC BY-NC-SA license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by LibreTexts.

- 14.6: Speaking Ethically and Avoiding Fallacies by Anonymous is licensed CC BY-NC-SA 3.0. Original source: <https://2012books.lardbucket.org/books/communication-for-business-success/>.