

Common Fallacies to Avoid

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This is offered in hopes that it might amuse (especially in the examples included), as well as provide a very short reference to a dozen of the more frequently committed fallacies in writing articles, letters, and in speaking out on controversial topics associated with animal liberation. I believe that animal liberationists themselves can use valid arguments, and only stand to improve their credibility by watchfully purging their discourse of all fallacies. Recognizing fallacies also sharpens our ability to criticize the arguments of opponents of animal liberation. Often when we try to present our views convincingly (instead of just trying to sway people emotionally), we present arguments. Arguments involve trying to show that one or more proposition(s) (i.e., the conclusion(s)) is true by appealing to other propositions (the premises). In constructing valid arguments, we would do well to avoid several common errors in reasoning, some of which are described, with illustrations, below:

1. **Ad hominem fallacy.** Trying to refute another's view by attacking the person who holds that view (with insults, say) instead of addressing the view itself. Example: "What Smith says is false, because he is a son-of-a-bitch vivisector."
2. **Fallacy of hasty generalization.** This involves inferring that because some things are a certain way, therefore *all* such things are that way. Example: "Many animals exploiters only care about making money. Therefore *all* animal exploiters only care about furthering their greed."
3. **Fallacy of begging the question.** This involves assuming the view that one is setting out to prove or support. It is one of the most common but often the most difficult to detect. Example 1: "Animal welfarists are misguided fools. I have observed one welfarist organization at work, and although I am sure they will disagree, the bulk of their actions were foolish. So they most certainly are fools!" Example 2: "We should stop accosting fur wearers." "Why?" "Because it is wrong!"
4. **Ignoratio elenchus (irrelevance).** This error occurs where a consideration is introduced to support a conclusion but is actually irrelevant to the conclusion itself. Example: "Some leaders of the bigger pro-animal organizations make obscene amounts of money off of the suffering of animals. So we should not focus on generating money to help animals, thus buying into this consumerist-capitalist system, and try to help them through direct action and education instead."
5. **Tu quoque fallacy.** When someone is accused of wrongdoing, and the person criticized shoots back that the accuser is guilty of the same thing, this is wrongly thought to dissipate the original criticism. Example: "Your needless wearing of fur is immoral." "So, I see you're sporting leather shoes!"
6. **Fallacy of inappropriate appeal to authority.** This involves citing a famous person who holds an opinion as an argument in favor of the opinion's truth. Example: "Albert Schweitzer said we must have reverence for all life, so we must never purge ourselves of worms." Note: some appeals to authority may be legitimate, such as introducing the Pope's views on abortion and concluding from this what is the official stance of the Roman Catholic Church on this issue.

7. **Ad populum fallacy.** Trying to uphold a view by appeal to what people widely believe. Example: "Most people say that animal rightists are somehow associated with violence, so there must be a lot of truth to that idea."
8. **Genetic fallacy.** A view is judged based on how its origin, but not its justification. Example: "These statistics come from the Fur Institute of Canada, so they must be wrong!"
9. **The fallacy of false cause.** One infers from one event following another that the first event was the cause of the second. Example: "I wrote a letter to a prominent entertainer once that he should stop using animals in his acts. Ever since then, I haven't seen any animals in his acts. It just shows you what one letter can do!"
10. **Complex question fallacy.** One expresses a question involving an untrue presupposition. Example: "So have you stopped slandering anarchist animal liberationists yet, or are you still at it?"
11. **Fallacy of equivocation.** The conclusion is argued for by someone who uses the same key term differently in the argument. Example: "Life is sacred, as Albert Schweitzer believed. So all pro-lifers on the abortion issue--who also say this--are really Schweitzerians at heart, even though they may not quite realize it yet."
12. **Fallacy of accident.** This tricky reasoning applies a rule or principle that holds in general to some inappropriate special case. Example: "It is wrong to lie. So if a vivisector comes knocking at your door, and an ALF person is hiding in your attic with some rescued animals that the vivisector has a legal claim to, you should tell him the truth when asked about the whereabouts of these animals." The **Fallacy of converse accident** is just the reverse, taking a special case and generalizing inappropriately to a general rule. Example: "We use highways paved by slaves. So we should use any animal tested products, even if they do involve injustice in their making."