

Exploratory Questions: Possible Flaws in an Argument

wayne . smi th@csun . edu

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“Unjustified Assumption”

The argument is based on a questionable assumption.

“Skill and Will”

The argument assumes that people have the ability (skills) to do something or the motivation (will) to do it, when this has not been proven to be the case.

“Extreme Language”

The argument (usually the conclusion) uses language so extreme that the premises cannot justify the conclusion.

“Terms are too Vague”

The language used is too vague; that is, it’s not clear enough to know whether any part of the argument is correct or not.

“Predicting the Future”

The argument tries to predict the future, but it’s equally plausible that the future could turn out some other way.

“What’s Their Motivation”

Does the writer or speaker of the argument have a secret, unspoken agenda of some type?

“The Troubled Analogy”

The argument says something is like something else, but has not established enough similarities to make a good (i.e., *not* “troubled”) analogy.

“Confusing Signs of a Thing for the Thing Itself”

The argument relies on a false positive: that is, something that looks true but isn’t, in fact, true. This can happen when the writer or speaker has an incentive to over-report something.

“Short-term vs. Long-term”

The argument says that something is good, but it could be that the something is only good in the short-run not the long-run, or vice-versa. This difference can be very subtle.

“Sample Isn’t Representative/Sample is Too Small/No Control Group”

The argument relies on statistical data but there are serious methodological issues.

“The Ever-Changing Pool”

The argument relies on a sample that simply changes too often, like social clubs.

“Correlation Does Not Equal Causation”

The argument indicates that two things are associated and implies that one caused the other. This is one of the most common errors made with statistical data.

“Nothing Is Quantified”

The argument discusses things that should be quantified—like money—but fails to, indeed, quantify them either all or appropriately.

“How Was It Before”

The argument discusses the present or predicts the future, but doesn’t provide any information about the past that would be useful to evaluate the present or future.

“Mathematical Confusion”

The argument discusses percentage (relative) numbers when it really should be discussing real (absolute) numbers, or vice-versa.