

## **Red Herring and Straw Man Fallacies in Debates**

**Asst. Inst. Nibras Mohammed Salih Al- Darraji**  
University of Samarra', College of Education, Iraq  
[nibras.m@uosamarra.edu.iq](mailto:nibras.m@uosamarra.edu.iq)

### **Abstract**

In general, debaters attempt to win an argument by using different styles or techniques. Using fallacies is one of these techniques. This research focuses on the Red Herring and Straw Man fallacies in debates. Red herring fallacy is related to distracting or missing the point by focusing on unrelated issues. Straw Man fallacy is a misrepresentation or distortion of other's arguments in order to win an intended goal. This research examines these two fallacies in social debates, literature, political debates and in business with examples.

**Keywords:** fallacy, Red herring, Straw Man, fallacious debates

## 1. Red herring Fallacy

First of all, fallacies can be introduced as debates that are far from norms of reasoning. Surprisingly, humans have two reverse attributes in understanding and expressing fallacies. Firstly, they have the ability to differentiate between fallacies and healthy arguments or discussions. Nonetheless, secondly, they are prone to be deceived or persuaded by fallacious debates. However, there is a number of debates that can be fallacious in some contexts but healthy in others, like the debate of ad populum (Oswald et al, 2018: 175).

Sometimes, heuristic ways or styles are used in debates, therefore, they surpass criticism and lead to consistent results. Consequently, successing of such debates or fallacious debates occurs in the utilization of such heuristics and at the same time these heuristics confirm very beneficial in healthy debates or discourses (ibid).

Besides, a fallacy is a notion that many people think to be true, however, it is based on false or incorrect reasoning or information (Collines, 2006: 514).

Now, Red Herring fallacy is a piece of information which is intended to divert people's attention from something vital to another matter achieving some goals in a misleading style. This fallacy is employed either as a literary device to distract the attention from a character to a side character, or as a rhetoric technique, and this occurs when someone responds to a certain query with irrelevant subject to avoid direct refusal or shift the debate in a new direction. This device is called Red Herring fallacy, for example, if politicians are asked how they deal with a certain issue and they answer with unrelated matter to distract others attention from the original topic, then this style is called Red Herring Fallacy (www.effectiviology. Com).

Actually, it is said that the name of Red Herring fallacy is given from old western tactic to prevent hunters from killing foxes (Walton, 2008: 94).

Others state that this name, Red Herring, was given from a smoked pungent fish that often throw hounds off the smell trace. This scent of the smoked fish is very strong and it is not a live one. This fallacy is informal that has a flaw in reasoning or has unconvincing evidence. Whereas, the formal fallacy is logical somehow, like:

"Argument A is presented by person 1. Person 2 introduces argument B. Argument A is abandoned" (Rivera, 2018: 208).

This fallacy is to be illogical if its result is not related to the premise. As to say: "Child labour is on the increase these days. We must institute a one- couple- child policy in the contrary."

This argument is considered a red herring fallacy because the premise, "child labour..." doesnot warrant the result, "we must... ."

This fallacy forbids the listener from reaching obvious results or conclusion. So, it is called as a fallacy of distraction. It is also called as ignoratioelenchi 'ignorance of the refutation'

This fallacy exists in many different types of debates:

### **1.1 Red Herring in Social debates:**

Typically, debaters of different topics, uses facts reasoning and logic to prove their ideas on what they believe. Besides, understanding fallacies gives advantage over others who may not have knowledge or sufficient knowledge of fallacies while they are debating. That because they have wide understanding of persuasive speeches or discussions. At the same time, they are aware if others use debates with little data or content and the entire argument rests on emotional connection with certain persuasion, music, rhetoric or images ( Ansah, 2019: 172).

Generally, laymen or public speakers use a fallacy to enrich their debates. They are assumed to be rhetoricians and to evoke emotions in the listeners by using such fallacies (Capaldi, 1973:12).

Examples of red herring fallacy are many in every day debates among people. One of them occurs in a conversation in a simple workplace:

Alex: You promised me yesterday that you were going to take care of this task.

Bob: Oh! Yeah, that. Actually, I am working on a really cool project now, want to see some screenshots?

In this conversation, Alex raises something important to him and in return Bob avoids the accurate answer by using this fallacy in order to distract Alex's attention to another topic ([www.effectiviology.com](http://www.effectiviology.com)).

### **1.2 Red Herring in Literature:**

This fallacy is, as it is said previously, a literary device used in mysteries, thrillers and detective stories that can guide readers to a false path and divert their attention from what is really happening in the plot. In the same vein, writers want to make their readers guess until the end. In other words, this fallacy is used as a suspenseful style by including details added to purposefully misguide readers and put a false mark.

This technique misleads them from predicting the real end. At the end, the readers are going to be surprised and enjoyed an event when is revealed or something along those lines ([www.masterclass.com](http://www.masterclass.com)).

The author Conan Doyle of Sherlock Holmes shows the Red Herring. The real murder is distracted and the readers start suspecting the escaped convict and Barrymore. The mystery in the end is discovered by the sudden admission of the wife that her husband was the real criminal and was behind the whole mystery (Rivera, 2018: 208).

### **1.3 Red Herring in Politics:**

Red Herring as a style of confounding and confusing is one of the most famous and most commonly used in politics. The use of Red herring fallacy by politicians is old, it is used by them as a means to divert the attention of people or public from the real problems that the politicians cause. The argument they present is, sometimes, not true. Nonetheless, they try to show such argument to be important and true (Lorin, 2018: 1).

Overwhelmingly, it is noticed that a politician is asked a plain or obvious question, and in the blink of an eye, they turn the subject to another side or issue. Yet, many rhetoricians discover or know that such arguments are actually just a red herring. In general they avoid delicate topics ([www.examples.yourdictionary.com](http://www.examples.yourdictionary.com)).

Actually, the examples expressed about politicians are many and subtly shaded:

-The police should stop environmental demonstrators from inconveniencing the general public. We pay our taxes.

-Surely global meltdown is infinitely worse than a little inconvenience?

Here, the Red Herring is used obviously. The first person is irresistibly led, forgetting or missing the original aim behind his question by using irrelevant issues. No conclusion is reached (Pirie, 2007).

Sometimes, social and political commentators resort to errors in debates or arguments to appeal to the emotions of their audience. As the following example:

All elected presidents in Ghana in the 4<sup>th</sup> Republic of Ghana have been given two terms (8 years). All my predecessors were able to accomplish their mandate in two terms. Therefore, I also deserve two terms to be able to accomplish my mandate, of course, every leader must be given equal opportunity.

Again the premise is different from the conclusion, the speaker wants to achieve his goal by using such fallacies (Ansah, 2019: 175).

#### **1.4 Red Herring in Business:**

As experts at making bad news sound, are business leaders and companies. They use different ways or styles even if they have to change the subject totally, the super important thing is to achieve their goals. One of fallacious styles they resort to, is the Red Herring fallacy. The workplace is one of the common places to find such fallacy in debates ([www.examples.yourdictionary.com](http://www.examples.yourdictionary.com)).

An example of this fallacy in business field, if the workers demand raises, the answer is going to be: "Sure, we have not given raises in over five years to our employees. You know, we work really hard to make a good product. We try to ensure the best customer service, too" (ibid).

Here, it is noticed that the request is different from the answer just to distract the attention of the workers to another topic, just, to achieve hidden goals.

#### **2. The Straw Man Fallacy**

Online Etymology Dictionary says that the name 'man of straw' is used to describe an imaginary opponent in 1620s. in debates means, "an easily refuted imaginary opponent in any argument" ([www.etymonline.com](http://www.etymonline.com)).

This fallacy can be defined according to two factors, the misrepresentation and the refutational aspects. The misrepresentation aspect of this fallacy is concerned with the form, whereas the refutational one is related to the function. This fallacy is achieved when the misrepresentation refutes the views of the opponent plus the distortion of the content as a means of attacking. This fallacy reflects that there is a disagreement of standpoints between two parties (Schumann, 2022:1).

This fallacy is operating one other's arguments rather than on its own. This means that the parties can use this fallacy at any given time and at any type of arguments. Consequently, any standpoint by the opponent can be refuted or distorted at any stage of debates. The user of this fallacy puts the goal of the debate into a position of weakness and putting themselves as having superior rhetorical competence compared to the opponent.

Besides, the users of this fallacy create an obstruction to hinder the continuation of a healthy critical discussion. By doing that, the opponents have to justify how the user of this fallacy has distorted or misrepresented their point (ibid: 3).

Straw Man fallacy is considered a distinctive type of sophistical style, because of the many problems and trickiness in deciding what the user of this fallacy position is (Walton, 1996: 125).

The deceptive shift is the core of this fallacy. If the respondents are present in the debates, then the situation or this fallacy's practice is different if they are not. Nonetheless, the respondents are still bound by what they already said and the users of this fallacy can use the respondents' speech or standpoints against them (ibid: 126).

### **2.1 Straw Man Fallacy in Social Debates:**

As it is said previously, this fallacy is a technique aiming at misrepresenting or distorting other's discourse. By using this fallacy, they achieve their goals and distort the opponent's standpoint.

Actually, examples of this fallacy in social debates are many, one of them is a husband and a wife are discussing what to adopt a dog or a cat:

Wife: I'd rather have a dog than a cat.

Husband: Why do you hate cats?

Here, the wife does not say that she dislikes or hates cats, only she prefers dogs actually. The husband, distorts the wife's argument trying to defend his choice. The wife is going to defend herself by saying that she did not say that, consequently, the course of this discussion would be changed to another topic ([www.Examples.yourdictionary.com](http://www.Examples.yourdictionary.com)).

### **2.2 Straw Man Fallacy in Literature:**

Martin Luther in his, 'The Babylonian Captivity of the Church', is the earliest writer of a straw man debates. This work comes as a responding to Catholic Church's discourses criticism to him, describing their purposefully misunderstood that he wants to stop serving the Eucharist, but Luther asserts he has not done that and that the church itself wants to change this elements of church services by saying, "they assert the very things they assail, or they set up a man of straw whom they may attack"

([www.poemanalysis.com](http://www.poemanalysis.com)).

In Shakespeare's Othello, this fallacy is found when Othello speaks to his wife that reflects a sort of argument between the two parties:

Desdemona: And have you mercy too! I never did offend you in my life, never loved Cassio.

Othello: By heaven, I saw my handkerchief in 's hand. O perjured woman, thou dost stone my heart, I saw the handkerchief.

Here, Othello refutes his wife's argument by talking out of anger instead of listening to and exchanging healthy discussion with her (ibid).

### **2.3 Straw Man in Politics**

Actually, it is said by political observers and social scientists that this fallacy is a mainstay of today's political scene. During the period of elections, politicians resort to any means to gain support from people or voter. This fallacy is used by them to distort the opponent's image to knock it down like a man made of straw (Bizer, 2009: 216).

Famous politicians, not surprising, have employed this fallacy in their speech. For instance, president of United States, Bush and when discussing the war in a country, he states, "There's a lot of people in the world who don't believe that people whose skin colour may not be the same as ours can be free and self- govern. I reject that strongly."

This fallacy is obvious in that speech, as he uses this style to satisfy others with unreasonable notion that people with a certain skin colour cannot self- govern. Nonetheless, after spreading this claim with different mischaracterized opinions, people might infer that Bush's argument is, actually, the true one (ibid: 217).

Another political debate that has this fallacy is:

A: Social policies of the government are plainly inefficient. A number of scientific studies, including one recently published in sociology, expose major faults of the policies.

B: It's funny to say that the government's social policies are inefficient based on just one scientific study (Oswald, 2018: 175).

The argument B distorts the speaker A on a position that it is not expressed or intended, just to achieve hidden goals. Naturally, if someone is engaging with the conversation, they actually take the time to listen and engage with the points. Yet, in such styles or techniques it is found that listeners are listening just with the view of how they are going to answer the issue rather than listening with the view of understanding the point that is made.

### **2.4 Straw Man Fallacy in Business**

In an essay in, 'The Guardian' titled in 'Tax avoidance' by Taylor( 2016) states that as a sort of tax avoidance, big businesses are accused of resorting to Straw man arguments:

in submission to a Parliamentary economics committee examining whether tightening personal and company tax deductions could help fund a cut in tax rates, the Treasury and

peak business organizations argue that removing the ability of companies to deduct interest payments from their taxable income would be bad for the economy and force investment offshore. All the business submissions to the committee say they would rather keep the deductions than trade them off for a company tax cut.

Yet, Mark Zirnsak of the Tax Justice Network, states that this suggestion reflects the Straw Man fallacy, because no one is discussing as a tax deduction to remove the interest completely. But on the contrary, to impose strict laws which would prevent multinationals from tampering with international tax laws to pay little or even no tax.

Another example is,

-Budget Manager: I believe that more funds should be allocated to customer support. We are struggling in this area and need to lift our game.

-Department Manager: spending all our money on customer support means we will go bankrupt within 6 months.

Here, the department manager distorts the budget manager's request by substituting the phrase, 'more funds' by 'all funds' that the budget manager does not express or say (Cuofano, 2022).

### **3. Conclusions**

- 1- Fallacies exist everywhere, in formal or informal debates.
- 2- Such fallacies are used as a literary device or as a rhetoric technique.
- 3- Red Herring fallacy is used when someone presents irrelevant information to distract the attention from the original topic.
- 4- Straw Man fallacy is a subcategory of a Red Herring fallacy.
- 5- Straw Man fallacy is used when someone tries to distort the presented argument.
- 6- The main difference between Red Herring and Straw Man fallacies is that Straw man uses distortion so, the argument is going to be easier to attack whereas the Red Herring, there is no distortion of the original notion. Yet, the original notion or argument is just lost.

### **References**

Ansah, R. (2019). A Critical Study of Informal Fallacies in some Socio- Political Discourse in Ghana. University of South Africa.

- Bizer, G. et al. (2009). The Persuasiveness of the Straw Man Rhetorical Technique.  
Schenectady: Psychology Press.
- Capaldi, N. (1973). The Art of Deception. Buffalo: N.Y. Prometheus Books.
- Collins Cobuild Advanced Learners English Dictionary. (2006). Bishopbrings: Harpercollins  
Publishers.
- Lorin, R. (2018). The 13: Ashi- niswi. Wallingford: open books Publisher.
- Oswald, S et al. (2018). Argumentation and Language – Linguistics: Cognitive and  
Discursive Explorations Argumentation Library. Fribourg: Springer International  
publishing AG.
- Pirie, M. (2007). How to Win Every Argument: The Use and Abuse of Logic. Continuum  
publishers.
- Rivera, H. (2018). Bad Arguments: 100 of the most Important Fallacies in Western  
Philosophy. Shreveport: Wiley & Sons, Inc.
- Schumann, J. (2022). Do People Perceive the Disagreement in Straw Man Fallacies? An  
Experimental Investigation. Basel: Licensee MDPI.
- Taylor, L. (2016). Tax avoidance. The Guardian. 2022 Guardian news & Media Limited or its  
affiliated companies.
- Walton, D. (1996). The Straw Man Fallacy. Amsterdam: Royal Netherlands Academy of  
Arts and Sciences.
- (2008). Informal Logic: A Pragmatic Approach. New York : Cambridge  
University Press.

**Web sites:**

- Cuofano, g. (2022). Straw man fallacy in A Nutshell. Available at: [www.Fourweekmba.com](http://www.Fourweekmba.com).  
<http://www.effectiviology.com>  
<http://www.Masterclass.com>  
<http://www.Examples.yourdictionary.com>  
<http://www.etymonline.com>  
<http://www.poemanalysis.com>