Logical “OOPS”—Reading for English 1001

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Finding the Good Argument OR Why Bother With Logic? *by Rebecca Jones*

What follows is an adaptation of Frans van Eemeren, Rob Grootendorst,

and Francesca Snoeck Henkemans’ “violations of the rules for

critical engagement” from their book *Argumentation: Analysis, Evaluation,*

*Presentation* (109). Rather than discuss rhetorical fallacies in a

list (ad hominem, straw man, equivocation, etc.), they argue that there

should be rules for proper argument to ensure fairness, logic, and a

solution to the problem being addressed. Violating these rules causes a

fallacious argument and can result in a standoff rather than a solution.

While fallacious arguments, if purposeful, pose real ethical problems,

most people do not realize they are committing fallacies when

they create an argument. To purposely attack someone’s character

rather than their argument (ad hominem) is not only unethical, but

demonstrates lazy argumentation. However, confusing cause and effect

might simply be a misstep that needs fixing. It is important to

admit that many fallacies, though making an argument somewhat unsound,

can be rhetorically savvy. While we know that appeals to pity

(or going overboard on the emotional appeal) can often demonstrate

a lack of knowledge or evidence, they often work. As such, these rules

present argumentation as it would play out in a utopian world where

everyone is calm and logical, where everyone cares about resolving the

argument at hand, rather than winning the battle, and where everyone

plays by the rules. Despite the utopian nature of the list, it offers valuable

insight into argument flaws and offers hope for better methods of

deliberation.

What follows is an adaptation of the approach to argumentation

found in Chapters 7 and 8 of *Argumentation: Analysis, Evaluation, Presentation*

(Eemeren, et al. 109-54). The rule is listed first, followed by an example of how

the rule is often violated.

1. The Freedom Rule

“Parties must not prevent each other from putting forward standpoints

or casting doubt on standpoints” (110).

There are many ways to stop an individual from giving her own

argument. This can come in the form of a physical threat but most

often takes the form of a misplaced critique. Instead of focusing on

the argument, the focus is shifted to the character of the writer or

speaker (ad hominem) or to making the argument (or author) seem absurd

(straw man) rather than addressing its actual components. In the

past decade, “Bush is stupid” became a common ad hominem attack

that allowed policy to go unaddressed. To steer clear of the real issues

of global warming, someone might claim “Only a fool would believe

global warming is real” or “Trying to suck all of the CO2 out of the atmosphere

with giant greenhouse gas machines is mere science fiction,

so we should look at abandoning all this green house gas nonsense.”

2. The Burden-of-Proof Rule

“A party who puts forward a standpoint is obliged to defend it if asked

to do so” (113).

This is one of my favorites. It is clear and simple. If you make an

argument, you have to provide evidence to back it up. During the

2008 Presidential debates, Americans watched as all the candidates

fumbled over the following question about healthcare: “How will this

plan actually work?” If you are presenting a written argument, this

requirement can be accommodated through quality, researched evidence

applied to your standpoint.

3. The Standpoint Rule

“A party’s attack on a standpoint must relate to the standpoint that has

indeed been advanced by the other party” (116).

Your standpoint is simply your claim, your basic argument in a nutshell.

If you disagree with another person’s argument or they disagree

with yours, the actual standpoint and not some related but more easily

attacked issue must be addressed. For example, one person might

argue that the rhetoric of global warming has created a multi-million

dollar green industry benefiting from fears over climate change. This

is an argument about the effects of global warming rhetoric, not global

warming itself. It would break the standpoint rule to argue that the

writer/speaker does not believe in global warming. This is not the issue

at hand.

4. The Relevance Rule

“A party may defend his or her standpoint only by advancing argumentation

related to that standpoint” (119).

Similar to #3, this rule assures that the evidence you use must actually

relate to your standpoint. Let’s stick with same argument: global

warming has created a green industry benefiting from fears over climate

change. Under this rule, your evidence would need to offer examples

of the rhetoric and the resulting businesses that have developed

since the introduction of green industries. It would break the rules to

simply offer attacks on businesses who sell “eco-friendly” products.

5. The Unexpressed Premise Rule

“A party may not falsely present something as a premise that has been

left unexpressed by the other party or deny a premise that he or she has

left implicit” (121).

This one sounds a bit complex, though it happens nearly every day.

If you have been talking to another person and feel the need to say,

“That’s NOT what I meant,” then you have experienced a violation of

the unexpressed premise rule. Overall, the rule attempts to keep the

argument on track and not let it stray into irrelevant territory. The

first violation of the rule, to falsely present what has been left unexpressed,

is to rephrase someone’s standpoint in a way that redirects the

argument. One person might argue, “I love to go to the beach,” and

another might respond by saying “So you don’t have any appreciation

for mountain living.” The other aspect of this rule is to camouflage

an unpopular idea and deny that it is part of your argument. For example,

you might argue that “I have nothing against my neighbors. I

just think that there should be a noise ordinance in this part of town

to help cut down on crime.” This clearly shows that the writer does

believe her neighbors to be criminals but won’t admit it.

6. The Starting Point Rule

“No party may falsely present a premise as an accepted starting point,

or deny a premise representing an accepted starting point” (128).

Part of quality argumentation is to agree on the opening standpoint.

According to this theory, argument is pointless without this

kind of agreement. It is well known that arguing about abortion is

nearly pointless as long as one side is arguing about the rights of the

unborn and the other about the rights of women. These are two different

starting points.

7. The Argument Scheme Rule

“A standpoint may not be regarded as conclusively defended if the defense

does not take place by means of an appropriate argument scheme

that is correctly applied” (130).

This rule is about argument strategy. Argument schemes could take

up another paper altogether. Suffice it to say that schemes are ways of

approaching an argument, your primary strategy. For example, you

might choose emotional rather than logical appeals to present your

position. This rule highlights the fact that some argument strategies

are simply better than others. For example, if you choose to create an

argument based largely on attacking the character of your opponent

rather than the issues at hand, the argument is moot.

Argument by analogy is a popular and well worn argument strategy

(or scheme). Essentially, you compare your position to a more

commonly known one and make your argument through the comparison.

For example, in the “Trust No One” argument above, the

author equates the Watergate and Monica Lewinsky scandals. Since it

is common knowledge that Watergate was a serious scandal, including

Monica Lewinsky in the list offers a strong argument by analogy: the

Lewinsky scandal did as much damage as Watergate. To break this

rule, you might make an analogy that does not hold up, such as

comparing a minor scandal involving a local school board to Watergate.

This would be an exaggeration, in most cases.

8. The Validity Rule

“The reasoning in the argumentation must be logically valid or must

be capable of being made valid by making explicit one or more unexpressed

premises” (132).

This rule is about traditional logics. Violating this rule means that

the parts of your argument do not match up. For example, your cause

and effect might be off: If you swim in the ocean today you will get

stung by a jelly fish and need medical care. Joe went to the doctor

today. He must have been stung by a jelly fish. While this example is

obvious (we do not know that Joe went swimming), many argument

problems are caused by violating this rule.

9. The Closure Rule

“A failed defense of a standpoint must result in the protagonist retracting

the standpoint, and a successful defense of a standpoint must result

in the antagonist retracting his or her doubts” (134).

This seems the most obvious rule, yet it is one that most public

arguments ignore. If your argument does not cut it, admit the faults

and move on. If another writer/speaker offers a rebuttal and you clearly

counter it, admit that the original argument is sound. Seems simple,

but it’s not in our public culture. This would mean that George W.

Bush would have to have a press conference and say, “My apologies, I

was wrong about WMD,” or for someone who argued fervently that

Americans want a single payer option for healthcare to instead argue

something like, “The polls show that American’s want to change

healthcare, but not through the single payer option. My argument was

based on my opinion that single payer is the best way and not on public

opinion.” Academics are more accustomed to retraction because

our arguments are explicitly part of particular conversations. Rebuttals

and renegotiations are the norm. That does not make them any easier

to stomach in an “argument is war” culture.

10. The Usage Rule

“Parties must not use any formulations that are insufficiently clear or

confusingly ambiguous, and they must interpret the formulations of

the other party as carefully and accurately as possible” (136).

While academics are perhaps the worst violators of this rule, it is

an important one to discuss. Be clear. I notice in both student and

professional academic writing that a confusing concept often means

confusing prose, longer sentences, and more letters in a word. If you

cannot say it/write it clearly, the concept might not yet be clear to you.

Keep working. Ethical violations of this rule happen when someone

is purposefully ambiguous so as to confuse the issue. We can see this

on all the “law” shows on television or though deliberate propaganda.

 Activity:

1. Find examples that violate three (3) of the rules above. Present the example, either by copying it, if it is something written, or by describing it, if it is verbal from TV, radio, movie, music, etc..

2. Explain WHY it violates the rule.

3. Suggest a way to correct the flaw in the logic of each example.