

## Spotting Propaganda

Our media-centered society continually bombards us with explosions of facts, figures, opinions, and ideas. Whether they appear in a newspaper, on the Internet, or on a television “infomercial,” many presentations are specifically designed to manipulate an audience to take a certain action and to discourage them from making a reasoned choice. It is important to become aware of the different techniques people use to manipulate their audiences, so that you will be able to spot propaganda and recognize how it can manipulate you.

### What is Propaganda?

Propaganda is a form of argument meant to further a special-interest cause through manipulation. Propaganda is based on false claims and highly emotional appeals. Propaganda tries to exaggerate an issue by making it seem better or worse than it actually is. Propaganda often introduces inappropriate appeals to needs and emotions, for example, selling drugs by appealing to a teenager’s need to feel accepted. Propaganda strives to thwart logical, analytical discussion, rather than to promote reasoned choice. It makes one viewpoint seem the only reasonable point of view.

Propaganda is especially easy to find in television commercials. For example, the recent commercials for hospitals and managed health care come close to being defined as propaganda. Almost everyone in the commercials is shown as being excited to be visiting the hospital. The patient being wheeled from an ambulance on a stretcher is shown smiling, even though she has just been in a serious accident. The little boy with a broken arm is happy to be getting a balloon. This commercial relies on emotional appeal. The advertisers are hoping that their audience will associate happiness and comfort with their hospitals. Most people do not like going to the hospital, but these advertisers try to convince people that the only way patients feel at their hospital is happy.

### How Do I Spot Propaganda?

Spotting propaganda isn’t always easy; however, there are some tactics that you can use to determine whether something is propaganda. First, you should always examine the motives of the speaker or the writer of the information. If the person has a great deal to gain from changing your opinion or convincing you to take action, chances are that he or she may be making the argument sound better than it really is. Also, if you become familiar with some common devices that propaganda employs, you will be able to protect yourself from deceitful tactics.

The following examples show tactics that are often used to manipulate and divert audiences from logical analysis of issues. As you look at the examples, remember that many of the appeals may actually rely on more than one kind of logical fallacy.

## Examples

### 1. Relying on Emotion Instead of Logical Evidence:

During the 1964 presidential race, Lyndon Johnson's campaign aired what became known as the "daisy commercial." This sixty-second spot opened with some footage of a little girl randomly counting out-loud as she plucked the petals off of a daisy; in the background was the sound of a ten-second countdown. When the countdown got to "zero," the camera zoomed in on the little girl's eye, and in her pupil one could see the image of a nuclear explosion's mushroom cloud. The announcer voiced over, "Vote for Lyndon Johnson--it's too important." By painting his opponent, Barry Goldwater, as a warmonger, Johnson hoped to evoke fear instead of reason, and thus win the election. He won, (and became involved in the Vietnam war)! His portrayal of himself as the antithesis of a warring chief wasn't entirely accurate, but it was persuasive.

### 2. Introducing Irrelevant or Unproved Evidence:

Irrelevant or unproved evidence can often be found in advertising. Recently, when a group of scientists announced that they had found more evidence to link smoking with cancer, the tobacco firms were invited to respond on the editorial pages of *USA Today*. Their response never mentioned the health issue of smoking or the new alleged cancerous effects. Instead, the editorials claimed that "anti-smoking fanatics" were trying to deny Americans their right to smoke. The editorials tried to divert focus from the health issue and implied that the scientific announcement was made to destroy consumers' rights.

### 3. Attacking a Person Instead of a Principle:

Rush Limbaugh often attacks people instead of their ideas. An example of this is Limbaugh's (in)famous statement that "feminism was established to allow unattractive women easier access to the mainstream of society" (Limbaugh Letter 3/94). This statement diverts the discussion from the issues of feminism to a personal attack on feminists.

### 4. Suppressing Evidence:

Suppressing evidence means trying to get rid of any evidence that doesn't favor your opinion or further your cause. Politicians do this. Examples of suppressing evidence are in the recent commercials on illegal immigrations put out by Republicans and Democrats. Both commercials use different statistics to claim that the opposing party is wasting money on illegal aliens and is soft on crime. Neither commercial mentions the specific evidence of the other side's argument, but suppresses it.

### 5. Oversimplifying and Distorting:

Commercials often distort and oversimplify evidence. For example, a toothpaste commercial claiming that four out of five dentists recommended such and such a toothpaste, may leave out the total number of dentists actually surveyed in the study. The truth may be that one hundred dentists were surveyed and only four of them responded that they actually would recommend the toothpaste!

Oversimplification and distortion are also used in politics. The statement, "Dole compromises with the Democrats," made in a derogatory fashion, implies that Dole commits a crime of sorts by agreeing with members outside of his Republican party. However, compromise is vital in politics. In order to pass legislation, Democrats and Republicans must compromise with each other. When we take the statement about Dole at face value, we fail to ask the most important questions: Why is Dole compromising? What is he compromising? How is he compromising?

**6. Internal Inconsistency:**

Finding internal inconsistency takes some examination after the fact. For example, do products remove wrinkles as promoters say they do; do laundry soaps really bleach; do politicians actually back the causes they claim to support; do cigarettes really create the lifestyles their ads imply? Do the results of the issue or the product support what is being claimed or are the results and claims inconsistent? Inconsistency also characterizes the presentation itself. Are the appeals to needs and emotions relevant and appropriate to the subject? Are the claims about causes, effects, or identities logical? Are the speaker's stated motives consistent with the way he or she actually treats the audience?

**How do I Become an Expert?**

Remember, it isn't always easy to identify propaganda. Sometimes it takes a lot of work and evaluation on your part! However, by looking at the motives behind a claim, by identifying the methods being used to create an argument, and by examining the argument's consistency, it is possible to avoid being deceived by manipulative techniques.

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