

HOW TO  
**WIN**  
EVERY  
ARGUMENT

THE USE AND ABUSE  
OF LOGIC

**MADSEN PIRIE**



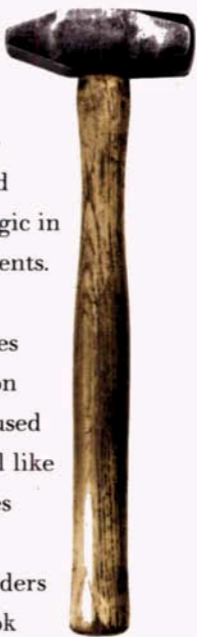
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IN THIS WITTY and infectious book Madsen Pirie provides a complete guide to using – and indeed abusing – logic in order to win arguments. He identifies with devastating examples all the most common fallacies popularly used in argument. We all like to think of ourselves as clear-headed and logical – but *all* readers will find in this book fallacies of which they themselves are guilty. The author shows you how simultaneously to strengthen your own thinking and identify the weaknesses in other people's arguments. And, more mischievously, Pirie also shows how to be deliberately illogical – and get away with it. This book will make you maddeningly smart: your family, friends and opponents will all wish that you had never read it.





**MADSEN PIRIE** is President of the Adam Smith Institute and the author or co-author of numerous books including *Boost Your IQ* and *The Sherlock Holmes IQ Book*, as well as *The Book of the Fallacy* (on which this book was originally based). He was formerly Distinguished Visiting Professor of Philosophy and Logic at Hillsdale College, Michigan.

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# **How to Win Every Argument**

**The Use and Abuse of Logic**

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# **How to Win Every Argument**

**The Use and Abuse of Logic**

**Madsen Pirie**

## To Thomas, Samuel and Rosalind

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## Introduction

Sound reasoning is the basis of winning at argument. Logical fallacies undermine arguments. They are a source of enduring fascination, and have been studied for at least two-and-a-half millennia. Knowledge of them is useful, both to avoid those used inadvertently by others and even to use a few with intent to deceive. The fascination and the usefulness which they impart, however, should not be allowed to conceal the pleasure which identifying them can give.

I take a very broad view of fallacies. Any trick of logic or language which allows a statement or a claim to be passed off as something it is not has an admission card to the enclosure reserved for fallacies. Very often it is the case that what appears to be a supporting argument for a particular contention does not support it at all. Sometimes it might be a deduction drawn from evidence which does not sustain it.

Many of the fallacies are committed by people genuinely ignorant of logical reasoning, the nature of evidence, or what counts as relevant material. Others, however, might be committed by persons bent on deception. If there is insufficient force behind the argument and the evidence, fallacies can add enough weight to carry them through.

This book is intended as a practical guide for those who wish to win arguments. It also teaches how to perpetrate fallacies with mischief at heart and malice aforethought. I have described each

fallacy, given examples of it, and shown why it is fallacious. After any points of general interest concerning the history or occurrence of the fallacy, I have given the reader recommendations on how and where the fallacy may be used to deceive with maximum effect.

I have listed the fallacies alphabetically, although a full classification into the five major types of fallacy may be found at the end of the book. It is well worth the reader's trouble to learn the Latin tags wherever possible. When an opponent is accused of perpetrating something with a Latin name it sounds as if he is suffering from a rare tropical disease. It has the added effect of making the accuser seem both erudite and authoritative.

In the hands of the wrong person this is more of a weapon than a book, and it was written with that wrong person in mind. It will teach such a person how to argue effectively, even dishonestly at times. In learning how to argue, and in the process of practising and polishing each fallacy, the user will learn how to identify it and will build up an immunity to it. A working knowledge of these fallacies provides a vocabulary for talking about politicians and media commentators. Replacing the vague suspicion of double-dealing will be the identification of the precise crimes against logic which have been committed.

Knowledge of fallacies can thus provide a defensive as well as an offensive capability. Your ability to spot them coming will enable you to defend yourself against their use by others, and your own dexterity with them will enable you to be both successful and offensive, as you set about the all-important task of making arguments go your way.

Madsen Pirie

## **Abusive analogy**

The fallacy of abusive analogy is a highly specialized version of the *ad hominem* argument. Instead of the arguer being insulted directly, an analogy is drawn which is calculated to bring him into scorn or disrepute. The opponent or his behaviour is compared with something which will elicit an unfavourable response toward him from the audience.

*Smith has proposed we should go on a sailing holiday, though he knows as much about ships as an Armenian bandleader does.*

(Perhaps you do not need to know all that much for a sailing holiday. Smith can always learn. The point here is that the comparison is deliberately drawn to make him look ridiculous. There may even be several Armenian bandleaders who are highly competent seamen.)

The analogy may even be a valid one, from the point of view of the comparison being made. This makes it more effective, but no less fallacious, since the purpose is to introduce additional, unargued, material to influence a judgement.

*If science admits no certainties, then a scientist has no more certain knowledge of the universe than does a Hottentot running through the bush.*

(This is true, but is intended as abuse so that the hearer will be more sympathetic to the possibility of certain knowledge.)

The fallacy is a subtle one because it relies on the associations which the audience make from the picture presented. Its perpetrator need not say anything which is untrue; he can rely on the associations made by the hearer to fill in the abuse. The abusive analogy is a fallacy because it relies on this extraneous material to influence the argument.

*In congratulating my colleague on his new job, let me point out that he has no more experience of it than a snivelling boy has on his first day at school.*

(Again, true. But look who's doing the snivelling.)

While politicians delight in both abuse and analogies, there are surprisingly few good uses of the abusive analogy from that domain. A good one should have an element of truth in its comparison, and invite abuse by its other associations. All other things being equal, it is easier to be offensive by making a comparison which is untrue, than to be clever by using elements of truth. Few have reached the memorable heights of Daniel O'Connell's description of Sir Robert Peel:

*... a smile like the silver plate on a coffin.*

(True, it has a superficial sparkle, but it invites us to think of something rather cold behind it.)

The venom-loaded pens of literary and dramatic critics are much more promising springs from which abusive analogies can trickle forth.

*He moved nervously about the stage, like a virgin awaiting the Sultan.*

(And died after the first night.)

Abusive analogies take composition. If you go forth without preparation, you will find yourself drawing from a well-used stock of comparisons which no longer have the freshness to conjure up vivid images. Describing your opponents as being like 'straightlaced schoolmistresses' or 'sleazy strip-club owners' will not lift you above the common herd. A carefully composed piece of abusive comparison, on the other hand, can pour ridicule on



the best-presented case you could find: 'a speech like a Texas longhorn; a point here, a point there, but a whole lot of bull in between'.

## Accent

The fallacy of accent depends for its effectiveness on the fact that the meaning of statements can change, depending on the stress put on the words. The accenting of certain words or phrases can give a meaning quite different from that intended, and can add implications which are not part of the literal meaning:

*Light your cigarette.*

(Without accent it looks like a simple instruction or invitation.)

*Light your cigarette.*

(Rather than the tablecloth, or whatever else you feel in the mood to burn.)

*Light your cigarette.*

(Instead of everyone else's.)

*Light your cigarette.*

(Instead of sticking it in your ear.)

Even with so simple a phrase, a changed accent can give a markedly changed meaning.

*We read that men are born equal, but that is no reason for giving them all an equal vote.*

(Actually, we probably read that men are born equal. *Born equal* carries an implication that they do not remain equal for long.)

Accent is obviously a verbal fallacy, for the most part. Emphasis in print is usually given by italics, and those who supply them to a quotation from someone else are supposed to say so. In speech, however, unauthorized accents intrude more readily, bringing unauthorized implications in their wake. The fallacy lies with the additional implications introduced by emphasis. They form no part of the statement accepted, and have been brought in surreptitiously without supporting argument.

The fallacy of accent is often used to make a prohibition more permissive. By stressing the thing to be excluded, it implies that other things are admissible.

*Mother said we shouldn't throw stones at the windows.  
It's all right for us to use these lumps of metal.*

(And mother, who resolved never to lay a *hand* on them, might well respond with a kick.)

In many traditional stories the intrepid hero wins through to glory by using the fallacy of accent to find a loophole in some ancient curse or injunction. Perseus knew that anyone who *looked* at the Medusa would be turned to stone. Even villains use it: Samson was blinded by the king of the Philistines who had promised not to *touch* him.

Your most widespread use of the fallacy of accent can be to discredit opponents by quoting them with an emphasis they never intended. ('He said he would never *lie* to the American people. You will notice all of the things that left him free to do.') Richelieu needed six lines by the most honest man in order to find something on which to hang him; with skilful use of the fallacy of accent you can usually get this down to half a line.

It is particularly useful when you are advocating a course of action which normally meets with general disapproval. Accent can enable you to plead that your proposed action is more admissible. ('I know we are pledged not to engage in germ warfare against people in *far-away* lands, but the Irish are not far away.')

When trying to draw up rules and regulations, bear it in mind that there are skilled practitioners of the fallacy of accent quite prepared to drive a coach and six through your intentions. You will then end up with something as tightly worded as the old mail monopoly, which actually spelled out that people shouting across the street could be construed as a breach of the mail monopoly. (They did only say the *street*, though.)

## Accident

The fallacy of accident supposes that the freak features of an exceptional case are enough to justify rejection of a general rule. The features in question may be 'accidental', having no bearing on the matter under contention, and may easily be identified as an unusual and allowable exception.

*We should reject the idea that it is just to repay what is owed. Supposing a man lends you weapons, and then goes insane? Surely it cannot be just to put weapons into the hands of a madman?*

(This fallacy, used by Plato, lies in not recognizing that the insanity is an 'accident', in that it is a freak circumstance unrelated to the central topic, and readily admitted to be a special case.)

Almost every generalization could be objected to on the grounds that one could think of 'accidental' cases it did not cover. Most of the general statements about the consequences



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