

Five tricks people use to win arguments dishonestly

A good lie usually starts with a truth

A guide for spotting bad arguments — in politics, online, and anywhere else

Smart people sometimes try to win arguments not by telling the truth, but by using sneaky tricks. Once you know the tricks, you can spot them anywhere — in politics, on social media, even in arguments with friends. These tricks are so common that scientists and teachers gave them special names. Here they are.

The trick	What it means in plain English	An example for youth	How to spot it — and what to ask yourself
<p>1. Straw man <i>Attacking a fake version of what someone said</i></p>	<p>Instead of arguing against what you actually said, they make up a sillier or more extreme version of your idea and argue against that instead. It's easier to knock down a fake argument than a real one.</p>	<p>You say: "We should have more recess." They say: "Oh, so you want kids to never learn anything and just play all day?" That's not what you said — but now you're defending the silly version instead of your real idea.</p>	<p>Listen for: "So what you're REALLY saying is..." or "I guess you just want to..." followed by something extreme you never actually said. <i>Ask yourself: Did I actually say that?</i></p>
<p>2. Whataboutism <i>Changing the subject to avoid answering</i></p>	<p>When someone is caught doing something wrong, instead of admitting it or explaining themselves, they point at someone else and say "But what about THEM? They did something bad too!" It doesn't answer the question — it just distracts you.</p>	<p>You say: "You broke my pencil!" They say: "Well, what about last week when YOU forgot to return my eraser?" Maybe you did forget the eraser — but that doesn't fix the broken pencil.</p>	<p>Listen for: "What about when [other person] did...?" or "You never talk about [other problem]." <i>Ask yourself: Did they actually answer my question?</i></p>
<p>3. Ad hominem <i>Attacking the person, not their idea</i></p>	<p>"Ad hominem" is Latin for "against the person." Instead of explaining why your argument is wrong, they say mean things about YOU — your looks, your past mistakes, your family. Even if the mean things are true, they don't prove your argument is wrong.</p>	<p>You say: "I think we should recycle more at school." They say: "Why should we listen to you? You got a C in science." Your grade has nothing to do with whether recycling is a good idea.</p>	<p>Listen for: insults, personal attacks, or bringing up embarrassing things about the person making the argument instead of talking about the argument itself. <i>Ask yourself: Are they talking about the idea, or about the person?</i></p>
<p>4. Slippery slope <i>Pretending one small thing will cause a disaster</i></p>	<p>They argue that if you allow one small thing, it will automatically lead to terrible things — like a ball rolling down a hill getting faster and faster until it causes a catastrophe. But they never actually prove that one thing leads to the other.</p>	<p>You say: "Can I play video games for one extra hour?" They say: "If we let you play one extra hour, next you'll want to play all night, then you'll never do homework, and then you'll fail every class." One extra hour doesn't automatically cause all that.</p>	<p>Listen for: "If we allow X, then soon Y will happen, and then Z..." where the steps jump from small to extreme with nothing to connect them. <i>Ask yourself: Did they prove each step actually leads to the next?</i></p>

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<p>5. Burden of proof flip <i>Making YOU prove their claim for them</i></p>	<p>If someone makes a claim, it's their job to prove it — not yours to disprove it. This trick flips that around. They make a wild claim, and when you question it, they say "Well, can YOU prove it's NOT true?" That's backwards. The person making the claim has to show the evidence.</p>	<p>They say: "There's a dragon living under the school." You say: "That doesn't sound right." They say: "Well, can YOU prove there ISN'T one?" No — they made the claim, so they have to prove it.</p>	<p>Listen for: "Prove me wrong" or "Can you prove that ISN'T true?" after someone makes a big claim without showing any evidence. <i>Ask yourself: Who made the claim? Have they shown any real proof?</i></p>

Why does this matter?

These tricks show up everywhere — in political speeches, news articles, social media posts, and everyday arguments. The good news is that once you know the names, you can spot them instantly.

When someone uses one of these tricks on you, you can calmly say: "That's a straw man — here's what I actually said" or "That's whataboutism — you didn't answer my question." Knowing the trick is the superpower.

These techniques are commonly studied in critical thinking, rhetoric, and debate. They are especially useful to recognize in political propaganda, high-pressure groups, and online misinformation — because the people who use them are counting on you not knowing their names.