

Critical Voter Lesson Plan – Fallacies/Simon Critchley Interview

During this week's audio lesson, we discussed some of the fallacies we have seen on the campaign trail, including:

- A review of fallacies discussed in previous podcasts, such as Composition fallacies, red herrings and fallacies introduced during the discussion of mathematics (such as cherry picking)
- Additional common fallacies such as Ad Hominem attacks, Argumentation from Outrage and Hasty Generalization
- More obscure fallacies, such as the Perfect Solution Fallacy or No True Scotsman

In analyzing use of these fallacies on the campaign trail, it's important to remember that:

- Real world political speech should not necessarily be judged solely on the misuse of logic or use of fallacies, standards more relevant for arguers with different goals than Presidential contenders
- That fallacious thinking is committed not just by political candidates, but by the media and public as well
- That simply identifying fallacies in your opponent's arguments is not necessarily the most effective way to counter them

Finally, we were joined by Simon Critchley, Professor of Philosophy at the New School in New York and moderator of The Stone, a regular philosophy column appearing in the New York Times. Some of the insights and arguments Simon provided during this interview included:

- There was a wider-than-anticipated general interest in philosophical subjects
- This interest extends to both subjects relevant to contemporary issues (like the election) but also to more general philosophical topics as well
- Language used in political discussion and debate is made up of more than statements that can be verified as being either true or false, but must also be evaluated based on how the speaker uses rhetoric to convince, persuade (and potentially deceive)
- Thinking can be considered a social activity that takes place "outside the brain" in communication between individuals and groups
- That the best preparation for being a critical thinker includes a solid foundation in history

Critical Voter Lesson Plan – Fallacies/Simon Critchley Interview

Terminology

Important vocabulary terms used in this lesson include:

- Ad Hominem Attack
- Appeal to Authority
- Argumentation from Outrage
- Category Error
- Composition Fallacy
- Equivocation
- Fallacies
- False Analogy
- False Choice or False Dilemma
- False or Faulty Generalization
- Formal vs. Informal Fallacies
- Hasty Generalization
- Loaded Question
- No True Scotsman Fallacy
- Perfect Solution Fallacy
- Red Herring Fallacies

Goals

The goal of this lesson is to give students an understanding of:

- Different types of fallacies and how they are used in argumentation and debate
- That real-world political speakers should be judged based on the goals they are trying to achieve, and not necessarily by standards more appropriate for classroom analysis of arguments (such as the use of fallacies)
- That not all attempts to control conversation (by changing the subject or not providing a direct response to a question, for instance) should be considered examples of fallacious thinking
- That everyone (including politicians, the media and the public) often engage in fallacious thinking and argumentation
- There is a widespread interest in material providing philosophical insight into the issues of the day*
- That political statements cannot simply be analyzed for truth or falsity, but must be evaluated based on use of persuasive rhetoric and other standards*
- That thinking can be considered as something that happens between individuals (through use of language) vs. just being something that takes place within the brain

* As discussed during the interview with Simon Critchley, moderator for the New York Times' Stone column

Critical Voter Lesson Plan – Fallacies/Simon Critchley Interview

Primary Resources

The following resources are available at the www.criticalvoter.com web site to support this lesson:

- **Critical Voter Podcast 012 – Fallaces and Interview with Jay Simon Critchley:** A 30 minute audio lesson that discussed fallacies (with examples used from the campaign trail) followed by an interview with Simon Critchley, moderator for the New York Times' philosophy column The Stone
- **Quiz** – A short quiz designed to determine if someone has listened to and understood the podcast.
- **Blog Entries** – The Critical Voter blog contains multiple blog entries dealing with the issues covered in the podcast (look for entries the week of October 21, 2012).

Additional Resources

[List of Fallacies](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_fallacies) - http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_fallacies

[New York Times Stone Column](http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/category/the-stone/) - <http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/category/the-stone/>

Links to additional information can be found on the [Critical Voter Resources page](#).

Suggested Activities

Activity	Notes on this activity
Have students listen to the podcast and answer the quiz questions to ensure they have listened to and understood the concepts covered in the lesson.	The podcast can be played in class or assigned as homework. The quiz is made up of four questions which were designed to be easily answerable by anyone who has listened to the podcast lesson in its entirety.
Watch or listen to an interview or press conference involving one of the Presidential candidates (or some other person running for office). Identify fallacies made by both the candidate and the questioner(s).	You can use the list of fallacies provided in the resource section to identify different individual or categories of fallacies. Use this example to demonstrate that fallacies are not just committed by those running for office. Also, try to identify instances when something that might look like a fallacy (such as changing the subject) might represent a reasonable response to a fallacious (or otherwise inappropriate) question.

Critical Voter Lesson Plan – Fallacies/Simon Critchley Interview

Activity	Notes on this activity
<p>Have students repeat the exercise of identifying fallacies, this time by reviewing a thread taken from the comments section of an online news source.</p>	<p>This exercise can be done by the class, or students can be given the assignment to perform this analysis individually or in small groups. You may want to add a level of competition to this exercise by seeing who can find the greatest number of fallacies in a single debate thread.</p> <p>[Important Note: Online debates often degenerate into name calling and use of language inappropriate for students, so teachers may need to pre-select and potentially edit comment threads used for examples in this exercise.]</p> <p>In addition to allowing students to practice identifying fallacies, this exercise should also be used to demonstrate that everyone involved in political debates (not just the candidates or the media) can be guilty of fallacious thinking.</p>
<p>Select one column from the New York Times' Stone column that seems particularly relevant to the subjects discussed in your class. Have students review how issues brought up in the column can be explored further.</p>	<p>Some material in the Stone may be too high level for certain students, or may not be applicable to your specific class.</p> <p>Try to select a story that is accessible and relevant to what you are teaching, and use it as a way to reinforce the message in the podcast regarding the importance of philosophy to all academic subjects.</p>