

DEVELOPING CRITICAL THINKING SKILLS

Recognizing Fallacies in a Line of Reasoning

Recognizing *fallacies* (fal' uh sēs), or faulty conclusions, in a line of reasoning is an important part of thinking critically. Read the following sentence: The French army was defeated while Napoleon was a general, so Napoleon was a bad general. It is true that Napoleon was a general in the French army. It is also true that the French army was defeated. However, to say that Napoleon was a bad general because of this defeat is a fallacy.

To determine whether there is a fallacy in a line of reasoning, it is necessary to ask the following questions:

1. Is there any connection between the facts given and the conclusion reached? If not, the statement is a fallacy. If there is a connection, go to question 2.
2. Is there only a loose connection between the facts and the conclusion? If the answer to this question is yes, go to question 3.
3. Are there enough facts given to reach this conclusion or is additional information necessary before drawing this conclusion? If more facts are needed, this sentence contains a fallacy in a line of reasoning.

Now, look again at the sentence about Napoleon. Note that when the three steps listed above are applied to the sentence, it can be determined to be a fallacy. For example, there is indeed a loose connection

between the facts presented and the conclusion reached. However, not enough information is given to determine whether Napoleon was a bad general. Perhaps Napoleon did make some decisions that influenced the battle's outcome. However, that alone does not make him a bad general. In fact, there were many instances in which Napoleon was shown to be a brilliant military leader. Therefore, the conclusion that Napoleon was a bad general is a fallacy in a line of reasoning.

For further practice in this skill, read the following four sentences. Using the three questions stated earlier, determine whether there is a fallacy in a line of reasoning for each sentence. Then, explain the reasons for your decisions.

1. The southern states seceded from the Union after Abraham Lincoln was elected President, so Lincoln was the cause of the Civil War.
2. The scorched-earth policy followed by the Russians was successful, so Karl Marx wrote *The Communist Manifesto*.
3. Election campaigns became filled with entertainment and advertising, so thousands of Americans crossed the Appalachians to find new homes.
4. The United States needed a quick way to get from the Caribbean Sea to the Pacific Ocean in order to protect its new territories, so the Panama Canal was built.