

The Importance of Logic in Journalism

Dealing with Bias in the Newsroom

By

Mark McGee

Gather - Confirm - Report

We began looking at the process of journalism in the last newsletter. Journalists *gather* information, *confirm* information, and *report* information — objectively and accurately. That process is part of what we call the “journalistic method.”

The journalistic method is a combination of the *scientific* and *investigative* methods. Journalists gather, analyze, and validate information in the field. The internal news team (e.g. producers, editors, managers) tests the findings of the external reporting team (e.g. reporters, photographers) to validate their views about a story. The conclusion reached through that *external* and *internal* process becomes the approved news story the public sees, hears or reads. The goal is to report news that the public can trust.

Reasoning



An important part of external and internal journalistic methods is the process of “reasoning” —

the action of thinking about something in a logical, sensible way — *Oxford Languages*

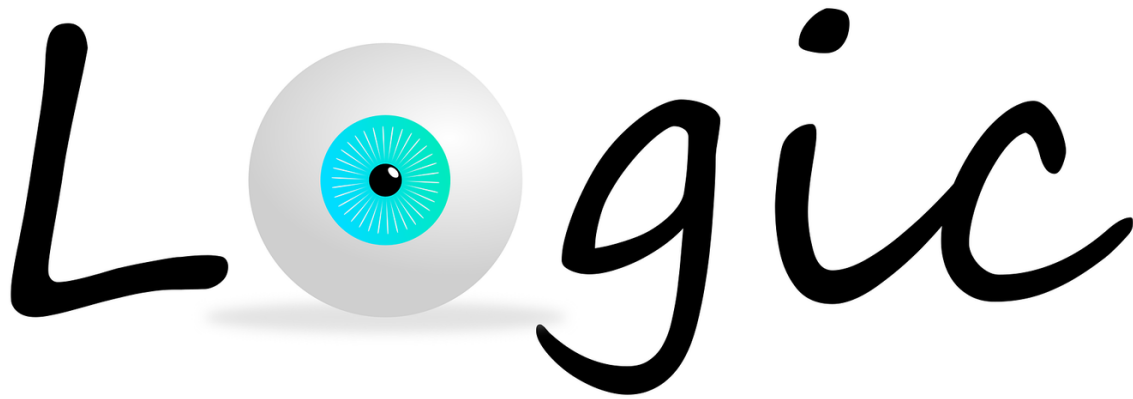
the process of forming conclusions, judgments, or inferences from facts or premises — *Dictionary.com*

the process of thinking about something in order to make a decision — *Cambridge Dictionary*

Some of the basic types of reasoning include —

1. Deductive
2. Inductive
3. Abductive
4. Critical Thinking
5. Analogical
6. Cause-and-Effect
7. Decompositional
8. Systematic
9. Comparative

There are many others, but this list is a good place to begin. Journalists should use all types of reasoning during the journalistic process, though the first four are mentioned most often in the context of “logical reasoning.”



Logical, sensible thinking is necessary for journalists to accomplish their work each day. In the same way journalists need to be careful about unchecked bias, they also need to be careful about illogical thinking — “lacking sense or clear, sound reasoning,” *Oxford Languages*.

Journalists are human, which means they have biases. If journalists don't believe they have biases, they lack self awareness. That means journalists need a way to control those biases so they don't show up in news reports.

News consumers often complain that news stories don't make sense to them. While it is easy to lay the blame on the consumer for not understanding a story, I think journalists need to pay attention to public complaints to see if those complaints have merit. We may find that a few simple checks will help us improve the next version of the story.

- It may be that one or more of the journalist's biases appeared in the story. Though the *internal* journalistic process should catch bias before a story is broadcast or published, it is possible that producers, editors or managers either missed the bias or share the same bias. Putting tighter controls on bias in the newsroom can help minimize the problem.
- It could be that adding one or two more pieces of information will help the story make sense. It might be that the journalist left some information out of the story because of time or word-count maximums. It could be that the journalist didn't think about some questions to ask during the initial coverage. A couple of phone calls to get the added information may be all it takes to make a story make sense to the consumer.

- It may be that some information in the story conflicts with other information in the story. It may be that some of the information is wrong or needs clarification.
- It may be that the information is correct, but was presented in an illogical way. Rewriting the story to present the information in a logical fashion may solve that problem.

These are all problems that should be caught during the external and internal journalistic process, but some things can get past journalists under the pressures of the busy news cycles they face today. Having a method for clarifying or correcting stories when news consumers complain is important for every newsroom to have available.

Logical Fallacy

It could also be that the journalist committed a **logical fallacy** —

a wrong belief : a false or mistaken idea — *Merriam-Webster*

A fallacy is a mistaken belief or argument, and a logical fallacy arises specifically out of an error in logic — *Vocabulary.com*

There are two types of fallacies — **formal** and **informal**. A formal fallacy contains an error in the argument's form. Informal fallacies are logically unsound because of problems with the premises.

It's easy to commit a logical fallacy because there are so many of them. One source lists more than 230 logical fallacies. Here are just ten as examples —

1. **Confirmation bias fallacy** — is possibly the most abused logical fallacy in journalism. That's where journalists approach a news story with a pre-existing set of beliefs. It's similar to *eisegesis* in studying a text like the Bible. That's where the student reads their own ideas/beliefs into the text rather than discover the ideas/beliefs of the original author (*exegesis*). Journalists with confirmation bias read their pre-existing beliefs about a subject into the news story rather than discover the truth from the details of the story itself. It has led some journalists to report information that was obviously false and then refuse to correct the story when confronted with the truth. Confirmation bias has been a big problem in journalism for years and managers need to help their journalists understand how to remove confirmation bias from their reporting.
2. **Opinion fallacy** — this is where a journalist confuses opinion for facts. Opinion journalism has become more

popular during the last 25 years, which is most unfortunate. It's one of the reasons that trust in the media has fallen so much since 1997. Surveys of news consumers found that 80 percent of respondents believed journalists should "separate fact from opinion when reporting the news." It's pretty sad when that many members of the viewing and reading public believe much of what they see and read is a journalist's opinion rather than factual reporting. A majority of the people surveyed even wanted journalists to disclose their political leanings.

3. **Loaded questions/words/language fallacy** - this is where the journalist *loads* their questions with words that are emotionally charged or that lead an interview toward the journalist's preconceived conclusion about a subject. Loaded questions/words can be used to sway news consumer opinions, get support for a journalist's particular belief or even push a journalist's personal or corporate agenda. All of those are unacceptable in real journalism.
4. **Appeal-to-authority fallacy** — I remember seeing this in courtrooms where the prosecution and defense both

called authoritative (expert) witnesses who gave conflicting answers to the same questions. Each side appealed to an authority, but the authorities didn't agree on many of the aspects of their particular expertise. We see that often in news interviews. Journalists quote one or more authorities who agree on a particular point, but don't quote authorities who disagree with their point. It's a type of *cherry picking fallacy* (also known as *fallacy of incomplete evidence or suppressing evidence*) where the journalist finds authorities who agree with their belief or opinion. Some journalists don't even make the attempt to hear from an authority with a different view. Even when authorities with different perspectives are used in the same story, journalists may give one authority more air time (in broadcast) or space (in print) than the other. Journalists sometimes present opposing authorities in a negative light (another fallacy). I often hear journalists couch their questions in news/press conferences using the appeal-to-authority fallacy. Journalists need to set aside their biases when they conduct interviews or ask questions at news conferences. The object is finding the "truth" rather than proving a point.

5. **Appeal to fear fallacy** — this is where a journalist (including anchors, hosts and commentators) adds an element of fear into their story which is not necessarily true. It can also be presented as a type of threat that something bad will happen if the public doesn't do something the journalist believes they should do (e.g. vote for a particular candidate, support a specific political party or cause, etc).
6. **Generalization fallacy** — this is where a journalist makes a generalized claim based on little or no evidence. The journalist may draw a conclusion based on a very small sample size. It's also known as a *sweeping generalization claim fallacy*. The claim is overly broad or applying a rule or conclusion too widely without allowing for possible exceptions. Journalists should report the facts of a story (all sides), but refrain from making sweeping generalizations in their reporting.
7. **Red herring fallacy** — this is where a journalist would divert attention from the real issue in a story by focusing on another issue barely relevant to the story. The result of that kind of reporting is shifting attention from the real

issue through the use of distracting information. It moves the story in a new direction often disconnected to the story the journalist is covering. Journalists need to know how to recognize a *red herring fallacy* because many people will try to shift a reporter's attention away from the real story. It's a way of changing the focus of a story and journalists need to know how to keep subjects of interviews focused on the story they're covering. However, journalists should not do the same thing in their coverage of a story. It's not fair or accurate.

8. **Composition fallacy** — this is also known as the *fallacy of arguing from premises*. That's where a journalist would infer that something is true for everything in a story when it might only be true for a part of the story. It's the opposite of the division fallacy.
9. **Appeal to groupthink fallacy** — this is where a journalist would report information in a story as true because a particular group thinks it's true. It's a type of group identification fallacy (also known as *identity fallacy*). Journalists should not identify with any particular group or allow their reporting to favor one

group over another. The one thing a journalist can and should identify with is **the truth** wherever they find it.

10. Appeal to emotion fallacy — this is where a journalist reports a story in a way to incite a news consumer's emotions rather than appeal to facts and logic. The *yellow journalism* of the past is an example of appealing to emotion rather than the facts of a story.

Fair Warning

I think it only fair to warn **news consumers** to be cautious of *fallacious* consuming. By that I mean news consumers should also be aware of their personal biases and how they can consume news based on their own logical fallacies. The ten examples above are just a small percentage of hundreds of *logical fallacies* — formal and informal.

Charging a journalist with fallacious reasoning needs to be done from a justified position. If you think a reporter made a logical error, see if you can identify which fallacy they used. You may find that you are right in thinking the journalist made an error. However, you may also find that you are wrong. Journalists and news consumers need to work hard to ensure that their reporting and consuming is based on solid logic and reasoning.



1960s Radio News, © Mark McGee