



## Personal Attacks & Abuse Online – Hot Springs Village

### Description

#### Ad Hominem: When people use personal attacks in arguments

When some folks are unable to debate an issue, they may resort to the use of “ad hominem” arguments. For the most part, ad hominem arguments are considered abusive and have no place in civil discourse, but there are some exceptions.

“An *ad hominem* argument is a personal attack against the source of an argument, rather than against the argument itself. Essentially, this means that ad hominem arguments are used to attack opposing views indirectly, by attacking the individuals or groups that support these views.

“Ad hominem arguments can take many forms, from basic name-calling to more complex rhetoric. For example, an ad hominem argument can involve simply insulting a person instead of properly replying to a point that they raised, or it can involve questioning their motives in response to their criticism of the current state of things.”

There are common types of ad hominem arguments.

#### Most common types of ad hominem arguments

##### Credentials fallacy

The [credentials fallacy](#) is a logical fallacy that occurs when someone dismisses an argument because the person who made that argument doesn't appear to have sufficient formal credentials in the relevant field.

An example of the credentials fallacy is the following:

**Alex:** studies have overwhelmingly shown that we should increase the federal spending on

education.

**Bob:** you're not an economics professor, so there's not reason for me to listen to you.

### **Poisoning the well**

*Poisoning the well* is a rhetorical technique where someone presents irrelevant negative information about their opponent, with the goal of discrediting their opponent's arguments.

An example of poisoning the well is the following:

**Alex:** I think that we should increase the federal spending on education.

**Bob:** you're a fascist, so clearly we shouldn't listen to what you have to say about education.

### **Appeal to motive (circumstantial ad hominem)**

An *appeal to motive* (the main type of *circumstantial ad hominem*) is an argument that dismisses a certain stance, by questioning the motives of the person who supports it.

An example of an appeal to motive is the following:

**Alex:** I think that we should increase the federal spending on education.

**Bob:** you're only saying that because you want to show support for the president that you voted for.

### **Appeal to hypocrisy (tu quoque)**

An *appeal to hypocrisy* (also known as *tu quoque*) is an argument that attempts to discredit a person, by suggesting that their argument is inconsistent with their previous acts.

An example of an appeal to hypocrisy is the following:

**Alex:** I think that we should increase the federal spending on education.

**Bob:** you clearly don't even care about public education, since you sent your own kids to a private school.

### **Association fallacy**

The *association fallacy* is a logical fallacy that occurs when someone is attacked based on their supposed connection to something that is unrelated to the discussion at hand.

An example of an association fallacy is the following:

**Alex:** I think that we should increase the federal spending on education.

**Bob:** well, the Nazis also thought that, so you're like the Nazis.

#### **Traitorous critic fallacy (argumentum ergo decedo)**

The *traitorous critic fallacy* (also known as *argumentum ergo decedo*) is a logical fallacy that involves telling a person who criticized something that they should stay away from whatever it is they are criticizing, if they don't approve of the current situation.

An example of the traitorous critic fallacy is the following:

**Alex:** I think that as a country, we're not spending enough on education.

**Bob:** well if you don't like it here, then you should just leave and go somewhere where they have the kind of education that you want.

#### **Tone policing**

*Tone policing* is an attack that focuses on the manner in which someone makes an argument, rather than on the argument itself.

An example of tone policing is the following:

**Alex:** I think that we should increase the federal spending on education. The current situation is unacceptable in many of the poorer areas of the country, and children are suffering because of it. What do you think?

**Bob:** okay, okay, no need to get so worked up over these things.

**Alex:** but what do you think about the situation?

**Bob:** I think that you shouldn't be so emotional about it.

#### **Abusive fallacy (abusive ad hominem)**

The *abusive fallacy* is a logical fallacy that occurs when an argument attacks a person in a direct and abusive manner, instead of addressing the point that they are trying to make.

An example of the abusive fallacy is the following:

**Alex:** I think that we should increase the federal spending on education.

**Bob:** I think that you're stupid and that nobody cares about your opinion.

Not all ad hominem arguments fit into one of the categories above and sometimes they may fit into more than one category. It may be difficult to define the category, but it really doesn't matter.



Often ad hominem arguments are used to bully people and the use of this unfair tactic can turn the conversation into a group bullying situation. When one person is allowed to get by with it, then others often join in, burying a person in a sea of erroneous, mean, and hateful arguments. When the offender is called on the use of ad hominem arguments, often the offender will say, "it is my right to free speech." But is it really?

There are a lot of personal attacks and abuse going on in Hot Springs Village online sites, including Facebook and Nextdoor. Many of us are guilty of this on occasion. For some folks, it is their modus operandi.

### Free speech and ad hominem arguments

#### Is it against free speech to not allow ad hominem arguments on websites?

What is free speech? The right to freedom of speech allows **individuals to express themselves without government interference or regulation**. Notice the word "government."

"Current legal precedent conclusively establishes that **social media users do not have a right to free speech on private social media platforms**. Social media platforms are allowed to remove offending content when done in accordance with their stated policies." [Click here to read this article from Cornell Law School on free speech.](#)

Understandably, there is a big backlash against social media for not allowing free speech. Free speech should be allowed until it infringes on another person's right to be heard and to not be abused, not be gaslighted, and not be bullied. Those types of situations are unconscionable and should never be permitted. The use of ad hominem arguments is often an abusive attempt at bullying a person. This is often done to shut a person down and it is frequently an effective way to keep someone with an opposing opinion from posting.

#### When is an ad hominem argument acceptable?

There are certain circumstances where an ad hominem argument can be reasonable. For example:

Consider, for example, the following discussion:

**Alex:** I read a lot about this theory, and I think that it's definitely wrong.

**Bob:** how much expertise do you have with this field, though? As far as I know, you have no formal credentials, which makes me wary about trusting your opinion as opposed to the opinion of the experts who proposed this theory in the first place.

“Unlike the previous example[s], this ad hominem argument is reasonable, rather than fallacious, since the person using the ad hominem argument targets it at the actual source of the opposing argument, and phrases the ad hominem argument in a way that clearly demonstrates why it's relevant to the discussion.” This can be used in rare cases in a discussion when certain credentials are important in **highly complicated fields such as scientific theory**. Having said that, folks should still be able to state their opinion or quote an expert. Remember though, there are often “experts” on both sides of an argument.

### How to counter ad hominem arguments



There are various options which can be used to counter an ad hominem argument and which option you choose depends on the situation.

- **Pointing out the irrelevance of the attack.** State that the personal attack has nothing to do with the discussion and point out the fallacious reasoning. Don't become defensive and better yet, ask your opponent to justify why their personal attack is relevant to the conversation.

- **Respond directly to the attack.**
- **Ignore the attack.**
- **Acknowledge the attack and move on.** This may be better than completely ignoring the attack. You can do this by saying, “I understand you think such and such, but this has nothing to do with the conversation here.”

### **Debate is good when it is fair and honest**

Debate is good. It can be fun and lead to solutions. Most often, ad hominem arguments lead to the side-tracking of conversations, shutting down conversations, and often hurt the feelings of those who are more sensitive. This is not fair debate and it often may not be honest.

This issue is important and needs to be discussed. Ad hominem arguments will probably never be totally eliminated. Exposure and understanding of this issue will create higher-quality discussions in our community.

The information and quotations in this article are from [Effectiviology](#) and Cornell Law School Website. Effectiviology is a great website with numerous interesting and informative articles. To go to the home page of the site, click [here](#).

By Cheryl Dowden, October 23, 2021

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