~ Chapter 5

Loaded Language and Slippery Slopes: Using the ELAR TEKS to Combat Faulty Reasoning

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Abstract

The Inquiry and Research strand of the 2017 ELAR TEKS for sixth through twelfth grade includes vertically aligned standards for teaching students critical media skills by questioning the reliability and credibility of sources, evaluating bias, and recognizing logical fallacies. This article describes how increased media saturation has led to citizenry being misled. Loaded language and fallacies are explained. Teachers are encouraged to support students' critical media literacy by teaching these skills and letting students practice recognizing the patterns of logical fallacies. Two strategies for teaching logical fallacies are provided, including a classroom Fallacy Board and a Slippery Slopes game, modified to specifically align with the TEKS and engage students in practice with patterns of faulty reasoning.

Keywords: *critical media skills, logical fallacies, ELAR TEKS*

"21st century students are part of the most media saturated society in human history" (Butler, 2020, p. 1).

The range of media information students consume has expanded to include more than print and television. Increasingly, many Americans keep up with current events and participate in marketing through social media. According to the Pew Research Center, 18% of U.S. adults get their news from social media (2019). Forty-five percent of teens reported to a Pew research survey that they are online almost constantly (2018). In their surveys, participants who rely on social media were more likely to score low on political knowledge questions. These same participants demonstrated a higher rate of knowledge about false claims. This is very significant among teens because smartphone ownership for this group is nearly universal across all demographic groups (Pew, 2018).

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Critical thinking has never been more important as students are immersed in media content that contains misinformation and persuasive techniques. Paired with a developing adolescent mind, our students are often the targets of social media influencers (Parasnis, 2022).

Today's media, rich in commentary and biased viewpoints, offers an abundance of examples of logical fallacies. Though some of these real-world examples are polarizing, there are many potential models found in our shared experiences. Examples heard on school campuses include this *stereotype*: "Girls are good at writing" or this example of an *either-or* fallacy: "Sam, I see you are not writing. Would you like to write with a pencil or a pen?" where a student is made to believe there are only two choices.

Yet, students when given an opportunity to find their own examples will name the misleading content found in popular and political culture such as the supremacy of our country because we are the best country or the problem of fake news because the news isn't true. Students and teachers share examples from school policies on dress codes and assigning grades, from environmental issues about the use of oil and deforestation, and from politics recalling slogans and misleading arguments made in campaigns and debates. Students participate in spaces where faulty rhetoric goes largely unchallenged including social media platforms like YouTube, TikTok, and Facebook, engaging in out-of-class communities where bias and faulty reasoning parade as truth. As demonstrated in the Inquiry and Research strand of the ELAR TEKS, it is the responsibility of educators to equip students with the critical skills necessary to evaluate the credibility of these sources of information.

Logical Fallacies in the TEKS

Absent in previous versions of the ELAR TEKS, the 2017 English Language Arts TEKS guidance includes a series of standards focused on teaching students to examine texts for reliability and recognize faulty reasoning (19 TAC Chapter 110, 2017). These standards are present in the Inquiry and Research strand for grades six through twelve.

The state standards include logical fallacies in this strand, so we will teach students to "examine sources for reliability, credibility, and faulty reasoning" (19 TAC Chapter 110, 2017). Table 1 provides a view of the faulty reasoning TEKS in vertical alignment.

Table 1

Grade Level TEKS for Faulty Reasoning

Grade Level	Reliability and Credibility	Faulty Reasoning
Grades 6 & 7	reliability, credibility, and bias	such as hyperbole, emotional appeals, and stereotype
Grade 8	reliability, credibility, and bias, including omission	such as bandwagon appeals, repetition, and loaded language
English I	credibility and bias, including omission	such as ad hominem, loaded language, and slippery slope
English II		such as incorrect premise, hasty generalizations and either-or

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English III	credibility and bias, and accuracy	such as post hoc-ad hoc, circular reasoning, red herring, and assumptions
English IV		such as straw man, false dilemma, faulty analogies, and non-sequitur

The logical fallacies in the standards follow "such as," which means that you can use these as options for instruction. The fallacies are ordered for a clear and developmentally appropriate vertical alignment with an effort to balance the challenge of these patterns across grade levels with increasing difficulty. The intention of this wording was to prevent the state from requiring students to specifically identify and name types of logical fallacies. Instead, the goal of their inclusion was to teach students to successfully recognize forms of logical fallacies in advertising, texts, and media.

This goal can be seen in the repetition of examining sources for "credibility and bias" occurring at all six grade levels. The additional faulty reasoning forms were organized to facilitate a vertical alignment. Table 2 includes these forms along with their descriptions.

Table 2

Examples of Faulty Reasoning

Faulty Reasoning	Example
Faulty Reasoning/ Logical Fallacies	Biased arguments
Omission	Leaving out part of an explanation that does not advance the chosen argument
Ad Hominem	Arguing against the person making the argument instead of against the argument
Loaded Language	Substituting facts with words that stir up emotions; a form of manipulation
Slippery Slope	The sequencing of events that lead to a more significant event though the connection is improbable
Incorrect Premise/Non Sequitur	The evidence or reason does not add or adds little support for the conclusion
Hasty Generalizations	Over generalizing – claim is based on evidence that is not strong enough to support the claim
Either-or / False Dilemma	Only two choices are presented when more exist
Post-hoc	Claim that since an event happened after an initial event that the first event caused the following event

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Circular reasoning	The argument is supported by the evidence and the evidence is supported by the arguments
Red Herring	Deflecting the argument to a new argument in an effort to change the topic
Assumptions	Presumes evidence for an argument though it is not there
Straw Man	Misrepresenting a person's argument to defend against it
Faulty Analogies	Since A & B have X in common, they will have Y in common too
Hyperbole	A claim that is grossly exaggerated
Emotional Appeal (Pathos)	Attempting to win an argument by appealing to emotions in an argument
Stereotype	Oversimplified idea of a group
Bandwagon	An appeal to agree to the position because everyone else it is doing it
Repetition	Repeating an argument over and over instead of providing evidence

Students are given opportunities to practice identifying the common characteristics of logical fallacies in small and manageable chunks, so they can increasingly recognize and reject more sophisticated faulty reasoning in the information they consume.

Biased Arguments

Loaded Language

Recognizing the bias in language is increasingly important, so as citizens we can weigh the words of our leaders. Though some loaded language is unintentional like broad generalizations made in the rush to complete a lesson or the use of hyperbole to communicate stress, others use rhetoric to mislead an audience. This is especially true in social media where publishing rights are provided without editors. Our students must learn to question the credibility of arguments to participate in a society built on truth, and they must learn to create writing that is well supported with evidence instead of relying on bias and misleading rhetoric to persuade their audiences.

Fallacies or Bad Arguments

The key characteristics of logical fallacies are that they are illogical or do not make sense. They are structured in consistent ways that students can learn to recognize quickly as they learn to evaluate sources of information. Often embedded in pathos (emotional appeals), logical fallacies tend to appeal to an audience by using omission, distraction, and group think. One example is the bandwagon fallacy that claims truth because of a shared belief. Another is the red herring that is used as a distraction, like when questioned about an uncomfortable topic the responder changes the topic to something unrelated but often inflammatory to deflect attention away from the issue.

These fallacies abound in the commentary-rich media found on contemporary airwaves and online. However, students with the tools to deconstruct arguments, recognize misleading patterns, and look for logical fallacies are able to use critical thinking in response to arguments made by those intending to mislead them.

Strategies for Teaching Students to Examine Reliability and Credibility

Fallacy Board: Live Examples from the World

The thought of bringing political examples of bias and logical fallacies from the media into our classrooms may seem risky in the current political environment. Increasingly, policies limit efforts to make our classrooms socially

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just. Teaching students to be critical thinkers provides students the opportunity to evaluate sources for justice independently.

A classroom fallacy board offers students an opportunity to share their own investigations into media in search for patterns that misrepresent information. For example, in 8th grade a three-column board with the headings, *Bandwagons, Repetitions,* and *Slippery Slope* would be a space where students could share examples found in media with their classmates. This board can be accomplished either on the wall in the physical classroom or on an online forum.

Slippery Slopes: **The Game**

Students can learn to create logical fallacies in a game adapted from *The Fallacy Detective* (Bludorn & Bludorn, 2015). In the Slippery Slopes game, students create examples of faulty reasoning. It is recommended that students work on just the four identified logical fallacies listed in the TEKS for their grade level. For example, according to the TEKS, English II students could be working with *omission, incorrect premise, hasty generalizations,* and *either-or*. Each student is given a word bank with student friendly definitions and examples of each of the four types of fallacies and four blank note cards. During each round, the students create four fallacies, one of each per card with the type of fallacy written on the back.

The cards from the group are shuffled together, and the students take turns reading the cards. Each member of the group makes a guess of which fallacy the student created. If the student guesses correctly they get a point, and the student who wrote the example also gets a point for each student that guesses his example correctly. Several rounds are played, and students gather points.

At the end of each round, the group votes for their favorite fallacy for the round. The author of the fallacy is awarded a bonus point.

The final round is the slippery slope round and worth double points, so all students have a chance to catch up with their peers for a win. In the slippery slope round, the students choose just one of the four fallacies for the grade level to create an example. Then they write one example of a slippery slope. These final cards are shuffled and played as they were in the earlier round. The student with the most points wins.

To track the points, students can use a scorecard like the one provided in Table 3. Another way to keep score is to use poker chips. The student with the most poker chips at the end is the winner. Playing this game provides students practice with the patterns of logical fallacies in a fun-filled activity that can be altered to fit the specific grade level TEKS.

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Table 3

Slippery Slopes Score Sheet

Round/Points	Author of Correctly Identified Fallacy (1 point each)	Correctly Identified Fallacy as an Audience Member (1 point each)	Favorite Fallacy (1 bonus point per round)	Round Total
Round #1				
Round #2				
Round #3				
Round #4				
Round #5				
SLIPPERY SLOPES ROUND (Double Points)				TOTAL POINTS

Conclusion

The state added these TEKS in 2017 to ensure not only that students are savvy consumers of information, but also that they can develop sound arguments with supporting evidence. Examining samples of writing that includes faulty reasoning can prevent our students from being easily manipulated and support their efforts to monitor their own development of persuasion. These strategies support students' awareness of bias and logical fallacies and provide students an opportunity to name the injustices they recognize in their world. Critical media literacy plays an outsized role in the growth of an informed citizenry (Butler, 2020), especially as social media outlets provide platforms for loud voices that go unchecked. With the right tools, students can learn to recognize patterns of deceit. When students become media literate, they take on the "cognitive shift of awareness" (Butler, 2020, p. 91) necessary for their future in a media flooded society.

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