

putting all the ingredients for a meal on the kitchen counter, but not cooking the meal; it's like putting the ball on the penalty spot but not kicking it. You get the picture. It's starting the job but not finishing it.

What should you do if your opponent does it?

It's a very easy argument to rebut, partly because it isn't really an argument at all. If you're on the side of single-sex schools and your opponent says, 'Co-educational schools are obviously a better preparation for life' and nothing more, you have only to say, 'She has told us that co-educational schools are a better preparation for life, but she has not shown us how or why.' This will remind the judge that your opponent has been guilty of unsupported assertion, and she will be marked down accordingly.

To sum up:

Unsupported assertion is when you say something is true without saying why. Don't do it. Don't let your opponents get away with it.

2 Playing the player, not the ball

Imagine two young children arguing about football in the playground.

'Chelsea are better than Man United.'

'Man United are better than Chelsea.'

'Chelsea are better than Man United.'

'Man United are better than Chelsea.'

So far, they're using our first logical fallacy:
unsupported assertion.

Let's see what happens now.

**'You only support Man United
because you're stupid.'**

**'People who support Chelsea are
a load of stuck-up Londoners.'**

They've now moved on to a new logical fallacy. It has a Latin name: the *ad hominem* - literally, to the person. Or, to put it another way, and to use a metaphor appropriate to the preceding discussion, playing the player, not the ball.

Play
the
ball,
not the
player

The *ad hominem* is used when you attack the person making the argument ('you'), or a person or people associated with the argument ('stuck-up Londoners'), instead of the argument itself (which team is better, Man United or Chelsea). In football, if you play the player not the ball, you give away a free kick; in debating, if you attack the person not the argument, you give away speaker points.

Obvious, you might say. I don't do that. I don't go into debates calling the people on the other side stupid / ugly / boring / saying they've got no friends, or even saying they're talking rubbish because they come from a rubbish school. But there are more subtle forms of the *ad hominem* that are still flawed, but are all too commonly used. Let's look at some examples, and how to rebut them.

The 'check your privilege' argument

- A. 'The proposal that 50% of places on science courses at university should be reserved for women is wrong because it would be unjust to exclude men who have better grades than women simply because of their gender.'
- B. 'Point of information. As a man, you can have no understanding of the difficulties women face in making a career in science, the unjust discrimination they have suffered for so many years, and you have no right to talk about injustice.'

It may be true that women have suffered discrimination in science-related employment for many years; it may be true that they still do. This could be a strong argument for the need to introduce quotas to address this injustice. The fact, however, that the person making the argument against quotas is a man has nothing to do with the argument. You cannot say to anyone 'you cannot make that argument'; you can only say, 'that argument is a bad argument because ...'

So how should A rebut this?

There's a bad way:

- A. 'Women who say that just want to get an unfair advantage when it comes to university applications.'

This is the equivalent of kicking back at someone who has kicked you. It will end up with both of you being sent off.

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