

The trouble is that an **argument by anecdote** is not a valid argument. Why? Because it can only provide proofs about one person, or at best a small group of people. You can't make a general proof from a sample of one, or very few.

Let's take an example. In a debate on the motion, 'This house would make all schools co-educational', a speaker against the motion tells us a moving story about her best friend, Harriet. Harriet started out at a co-educational school, but was miserable there because the boys all mucked about in English, her favourite subject, so she couldn't learn anything. Her parents took her out and put her in a girls' school, where everyone wanted to work, and now she is getting top grades in English. This proves that girls' schools always get better results.

Does it? What does this anecdote actually prove? It might prove that the English teacher in Harriet's first school wasn't very good at keeping order. It might prove that the English teacher in her second school was better at keeping order and also better at teaching English. It might perhaps prove that, for Harriet, a girls' school is the better choice. What it doesn't prove is that girls' schools always get better results.

How could the speaker have made the argument better?

She could have looked up data about exam results, which does, in fact, show that girls' schools tend to get better exam results than co-educational schools. That's girls' schools from across the country - so a large sample, therefore stronger evidence. If it was a short prep debate, where she wouldn't have access to this research, she could have made a more general point about the way in which girls tend, in general, to be more conscientious and eager to please their teachers, and are therefore more likely to achieve good exam results (why this might be and whether or not it is a good thing are both matters for discussion and, perhaps, debate). Of course, neither of these arguments would have the personal, emotional appeal of Harriet's story. But they would be much stronger arguments, and much more likely to win the debate.

What should you do if someone uses argument by anecdote against you?

It can be hard rebutting **argument by anecdote**, because it can feel like a personal attack, especially if the anecdote is particularly emotional or revealing. In this respect it is a bit like the 'check your

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privilege' argument we covered under the 'Playing the Player, not the Ball' logical fallacy. It is possible, however, both to respect the anecdote and to rebut the argument, by first pointing out that, while the anecdote may be true, it only applies to one person and one situation, and by then broadening the argument back out to general questions.

So, if you found yourself faced with Harriet's story, you could say 'I'm sorry that your friend had a bad time at her first school, and I'm glad that she's happy at her new school. Maybe that first school just wasn't right for her; maybe there were other reasons that she was unhappy, that had nothing to do with it being co-educational; maybe it just wasn't a very well run school. Well run co-educational schools are the best option for all children because ...' and off you go, back to the wider arguments for your side of the case.

It's hard giving up anecdote, precisely because it is so appealing. It's also used very widely to persuade, both in advertising and in politics. But **argument by anecdote** is not honest argument; it will be marked down by judges, and it will lose you the debate.

To sum up:

- Evidence must come from a wide base.
- One person's story is not enough to prove anything.

4 Argument by democratic majority

Democracy. Rule of the people, by the people, for the people.

We all love democracy. We all believe in it. It's a good thing, isn't it? What's more, it's compulsory. It's one of the British Values which all schools are obliged by law to teach. Democracy is like God used to be four hundred years ago; we can argue forever about what it means, but no one is allowed not to believe in it.

Democracy is a good thing, and debating is at the heart of it. Debating helps democracy to work better, because it provides a safe, respectful, balanced way for people to manage their differences, and this is what democracy should be doing.

However, while democracy is a good way to run a country, it is not a good way to prove anything. This leads us to our fourth logical fallacy: **argument by democratic majority**.

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