Pointing Out an Error

English 125, Rafe Kinsey

Monday, November 11, 2013

Now that you've learned a bit about logic and probability, it's (hopefully) easier for you to see fallacious reasoning in the world. Have you ever read an article that's annoyed you because it's making some sort of logical error? In this assignment, you have a chance to debunk that article and correct the error.

To begin with, you need to find an article that's made some error. Hopefully—and yet unfortunately!—you'll have found such articles as you've read widely, in your extramural reading and elsewhere.[1] Your task will be to write an article for a general audience pointing out the error. You'll need to introduce the topic, expose and explain the error, and discuss the implications. (Note: you won't necessarily do that in precisely this order!) You'll have several things to accomplish in the paper, among them:

- Appropriately setting the context and summarizing the *relevant* part of the article. (Note that this might be a relatively short summary.)

- (Perhaps) explaining why the article and the error matter.[2]

- Providing the necessary background to explain the error. For example, maybe the error is based on a misunderstanding of probability. Then you'll have to explain some probability in order to show the error.

- (Perhaps) discussing any relevant broader implications.

We've seen several examples of articles accomplishing this: Hanna Rosin's and Matt Yglesias's articles earlier in the semester, and the several readings for today.[3] An important thing to keep in mind is the role of *nuance* even as you critique an article. Note, for example, how Evelyn Lamb (in today's readings) acknowledges that there is some merit to correlational studies and distinguishes between the original study and the sensationalistic *Gawker* article about it, or how Hanna Rosin, after criticizing an inaccurate statistic about gender wage disparities, nevertheless notes that a lesser disparity still exists. Of course, if what you are seeing truly is outrageous, then too much nuance might be inappropriate; see, for example, how Yglesias has no sympathy for Roger Cohen.

[1] We'll talk more in class about finding such articles. One obvious type of fallacy to look for is conflation of correlation and causation; another is selection bias. If you're having difficulties finding an article, let me know! You might also want to consult the readings on logical fallacies from Corbett's *Rhetoric*, or from a more recent writing textbook.

[2] Whether you need to do this will depend on the context. If there's an article claiming an asteroid will wipe out the earth in 10 years, you probably don't need to justify the importance, since it's pretty obvious. But other topics might require such justification—either the specific topic itself might be important, or perhaps the error is common enough in public discourse that it's important to shed light on the error.

[3] For Wednesday, you'll be reading a few more in this vein.

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Requirements

Article Selection

As homework for Wednesday, November 13, I want you to start looking at some examples of articles where you might find these problems. Please bring to class examples of at least *two* articles that seemed problematic, and please also email me the URLs.

By Friday, November 15 at 5pm, please email me with the article you will be selecting.

Polished Rough Draft

Your polished rough draft is due Wednesday, November 20, in class. Please bring *two printed copies* of your draft. (One is for your peer to keep; the other is for you to keep.) Please also *email me* a copy of your draft by class.

Peer Review Comments

Your peer review comments are due emailed to your partner by Friday, November 22, at 5pm. You should cc me on that email.

Final Draft

The final draft is due by Tuesday, November 26, at 5pm. You should both (a) email me a copy in pdf form; and (b) submit a hard copy in my office mailbox.

Instructions for Your Final Draft

Your assignment should be typed, in 12-point font and *single-spaced*. Your main paper should be approximately 1-3 pages.[4] As with your other papers, after your paper, you should include (a) a paragraph reflecting on the assignment, in which you should focus on describing your writing process; and (b) a paragraph acknowledging any outside help and any sources that you used.

[4] This is approximately the length of many of the model articles we've read. As with most of our assignments, what matters is not the precise length; you should write an amount that appropriately covers the prompt, within these guidelines.