

Chapter 3: Alternatives to RF/FP

Alternatives to RF/FP range from the outright crooked to the virtuous but unhelpful. They are described in this chapter to prepare for evaluation of RF/FP in the next chapter. However, it is also helpful to understand the methods others might use and you might need to deal with.

Tricks

Most people are exposed on most days to lies, distortions, spin, slant, emotive language, unfair framing, biased 'research', mis-directions of attention, and other underhand methods of advocacy. Trickery is so common that, probably, not all is deliberate. More likely, some trickery is people copying arguments or behaviour without fully understanding that they are using tricks.

Decision processes that involve advocacy (e.g. that include a debate) encourage trickery. Sometimes a participant will say anything they think they can get away with to get the result they want or please their supporters.

A trick can be exploited further by inflaming emotional reactions to the misunderstanding created by the trick. This strengthens the reaction and can disrupt rational thinking that might detect the trick.

Body language is important with many tricks. In some discussions a trickster's calm manner frustrates their honest opponent. To someone not following the logic of the conversation it can seem that the honest person is the unreasonable one.

The variety of tricks is too large to itemize here. Instead, this chapter presents some of today's most common tricks.

Confident assertion

One of the simplest ways to promote a point is just to say it, confidently, and continue saying it regardless of how many times it is shown to be false. For example, an advertisement might say that a new model of car is 'exciting' when most viewers can see at a glance that it is not. A religious fundamentalist might say he is a man of peace even though he longs to exterminate non-believers. A crooked company director might say a product his company produces is safe even though he knows it is not.

Stating something you think is true without giving a justification is not in itself a trick. Perhaps you will give a justification later if required. It is a trick to keep stating the claim without justification regardless of its truth and regardless of how many times it has been debunked.

Confident assertion is frustrating to deal with because it is more effective than it should be and because it feels rude when a person repeats a claim even after you have debunked it.

A variation on basic confident assertion is to assert something then deduce something else from it – or seem to. This gives the appearance of a logical argument. For example, you could start with something like ‘So, given that all humans are innately spiritual...’ or ‘Given that there are numbers so large that they have no predecessor numbers...’ These should not be givens at all.

Body language, especially tone of voice, can make this tactic more effective. The usual approach is to seem as confident of the truth of the assertion as possible. Typical choices are a casual manner, a firm tone, or righteous indignation.

Suggestion

Using suggestion involves giving hints or using phrases at carefully chosen moments to put an idea into a person’s mind and let them think they thought of it themselves. It’s a sleazy tactic and not the same as making suggestions explicitly.

Suggestion also benefits from the right body language, especially tone of voice. It is usually casual, gently questioning, or wondering.

Profound confusion

This trick combines illogical, vague, complicated writing or speech with cues that create the impression of saying something important, even profound. This tires the listener’s ability to think critically and prepares the way for doubtful claims.

E.g. Here are the first few sentences from the English translation of a journal article called ‘The Law of Genre’ written by the postmodern French philosopher Jacques Derrida (Derrida and Ronell 1980):

‘Genres are not to be mixed.

I will not mix genres.

I repeat: Genres are not to be mixed. I will not mix genres.

Now suppose I let these utterances resonate all by themselves.

Suppose: I abandon them to their fate, I set free their random virtualities and turn them over to my audience – or, rather, to your audience, to your auditory grasp, to whatever mobility they retain and you bestow upon them to engender effects of all kinds without my having to stand behind them.

I merely said, and then repeated: genres are not to be mixed; and I will not mix them.

As long as I release these utterances (which others might call speech acts) in a form yet scarcely determined, given the open context out of which I have just let them be grasped by “my” language’

The rest of the text continues in this style. You would probably recognize this as pretentious nonsense and stop reading. And yet Derrida was highly influential,

with some people eagerly trying to find meaning in his words, arguing about them, responding to them, and trying to do similar work.

Exactly how people get away with writing like this and are even persuasive with it is hard to explain. The following mechanisms may operate.

Obscurantism: The writer thwarts critical scrutiny with words too complicated and meaningless to analyse rationally. All critics can say is that the work is meaningless so devotees assume the critics do not understand it and ignore them.

Over-estimation: Some people will be so impressed by a person's manner, appearance, titles, and supporters that they take their own inability to understand the text as evidence that it is clever stuff by a clever person. The bluff works on some people and that is all it takes to build a fan base.

Hypnotic confusion: One famous technique of hypnotic induction is the confusion induction. This involves saying confusing things with intonation that suggests they are deeply meaningful and important so that the subject's mind fights hard to find meaning. Eventually, tired and defeated by the effort, the subject's critical faculties switch off and any sentences with meaning are accepted uncritically. Derrida's 'The Law of Genre' leaves unwary readers with a feeling that genres should not be mixed even though no intelligible definitions or reasons have been given.

Selective emotion

It is often said that influencing with emotion is an alternative to influencing with sound reasoning. This is wrong. If we correctly understand a situation and the consequences of potential actions then emotions just help us weigh the factors in decisions.

When someone tries to influence us unfairly with emotion the trick is more than just evoking strong emotions. The trick draws our attention to just some relevant factors and tries to get us to see those as very important while ignoring others.

E.g. Imagine a charity advertisement shows just images of a suffering animal and asks for money. We are being led to focus on the suffering, to feel emotional about it, and give money. A thoughtful donor who resists this trick will also want to know what project will reduce that suffering, how much of the donation will support the project, and if there is already evidence of outcomes from the project.

Misleading framing

Another common trick is to frame an issue misleadingly. For example, most people are in favour of life and of choice. The opposing sides try to frame the abortion debate their way by saying they are 'pro-life' and 'pro-choice'. Similarly, do you debate homelessness or excessive population growth? Do you debate a country leaving Europe or leaving the European Union? Is a government policy stamping down on bad behaviour or denying some people their rights?

E.g. During 2021 some suggested that people who had been vaccinated against the SARS-CoV-2 virus which causes the COVID-19 disease should be given evidence of their vaccination, sometimes called a 'vaccine passport'. An argument

made against this was that it would lead to rules requiring the evidence (e.g. to travel abroad, to go to work) and that would 'discriminate against' people who had exercised their 'right to refuse the vaccine'. This framing trick exploits the common misconception that all discrimination is bad rather than distinguishing between fair and unfair discrimination. Here the discrimination would be fair.

E.g. A more complicated example of framing tricks involves employment and unemployment. There are several statistical ways to characterize employment and unemployment and which you choose frames the debate. For example, suppose the population of a country increases but the percentages of people in and out of employment remain the same. It would be true to say that more people are employed but also that more people are unemployed. Which people choose to say often depends on whether they support or oppose the current government. To properly understand unemployment you need to know that a person is only counted as unemployed if they have no job but they are looking for one. In a weak economy some people stop looking for work and that makes unemployment and the rate of unemployment lower than they otherwise would be.

Appeals to freedom

One framing so common it deserves a section of its own is to make something a matter of liberty. Some people occasionally complain that another person (often the government) is taking away their liberty, lecturing, moralizing, nannying, nagging, bossing, ordering, coercing, a dictator, a totalitarian, showing lack of respect for their personal responsibility, and interfering in personal matters that are none of their business. The complainer might even imply that they would have done the behaviour but now will not because the other person did not ask in the right way.

These complaints might be true, but, often, either the other person was only sharing information or making suggestions or recommendations, or the other person is expected to give instructions provided they are beneficial. It is fair for others to give advice or ask for changes in behaviour when there is scope for improvement, especially if the current situation is creating problems for them. We expect authorities to devise and enforce laws that do more than this. There is nothing inherently wrong with it; the problem is just when the advice or the laws are poorly thought out. The discussion should be about the consequences of the behaviour or the design of the law, not whether giving advice, making requests, or giving instructions are wrong.

E.g. Suppose a think tank issues a report suggesting a scheme to educate parents and children about healthier eating. Reactions are likely to include some saying the proposals do not go far enough, but others saying they are interfering in family life. It is 'middle class meddling' and 'parents know best'.

Conspiracy theories

These have a frightening ability to insulate people from logic and evidence. When people accept a conspiracy theory, they discount contrary evidence as fake, concocted by the conspirators.

E.g. During the COVID-19 pandemic some people thought the virus did not exist. They thought it a fake created by 'big pharma' and their friends in government and the media to help sell dangerous vaccines that were not needed. A few moments thought should have made it clear that this conspiracy would also have to involve hundreds of thousands of doctors and nurses, epidemiologists, and people willing to fake being ill and dying to keep up the pretence.

Another conspiracy theory was that the virus had been deliberately created and released to sell dangerous vaccines that were not needed.

Another theory was that governments around the world had used a mild virus as an opportunity to gain greater control of ordinary people, bringing them under a more totalitarian control.

Still another theory was that the vaccines were dangerous – deadly even – but as usual those in power, the elites, the 1%, Bill Gates, the government, the media, and of course 'big pharma', were hiding the truth.

In connection with these conspiracy theories many misconceptions and lies circulated on the internet and by word of mouth. Bizarrely, some people complained on social media that the same social media were censoring the truth about the vaccines and the virus.

Conspiracy theories are often presented as revealing a long-concealed truth. If a person attends to the conspiracy theory then they will learn something other people do not know and become more aware than others. To some people this is an attractive idea. Perhaps they are aware that they are susceptible to deception and want to avoid being deceived. Sadly, they do not recognize that someone is about to deceive them.

Insinuation

Yet another common trick is to insinuate rather than to make an explicit claim. Done skilfully this does not involve stating an untruth but leaves most people aware that the untrue claim was meant.

E.g. Suppose a person in a block of flats is hyper-sensitive to noises and that, every few weeks, some noise can be detected from other flats if you listen carefully. However, the sensitive occupant complains about noise to the managing agents two or three times a week, often making multiple complaints about the same incident. Even if the complaints do not falsely claim that the noises are loud the sheer frequency of complaints and the emotional language used insinuate loudness and nuisance.

Some journalists sometimes use insinuation to smear people they write about.

E.g. If a politically centre-left journalist wants to smear a conservative author then tactics might include mentioning that some of the author's readers are 'alt-right', the author's great uncle was a fascist 90 years ago, and the author 'has been criticized' (which is surely true of every adult but might be true recently because the journalist has made a criticism).

E.g. Suppose a politician gives a speech. As usual, some people on social media praise it and some criticize. A journalist might insinuate that the speech was bad using the headline 'Prime Minister's speech criticized on social media' instead of 'Prime Minister's speech praised on social media'. The effect can be increased by quoting and discussing a particularly critical Tweet as if it is representative of the overall social media reaction (even if it is the only negative Tweet).

Exaggeration

Insinuation is often paired with exaggeration. Exaggeration is a form of lying that can be harder to refute than a claim that is completely incorrect.

E.g. It is often claimed that unfair discrimination against some group is more common than it really is. People attacked for unfair discrimination in this way often mistakenly respond as if there is no unfair discrimination at all. The trickster then complains about this apparent lie, pushing the person to say something like 'of course, unfair discrimination does happen and nobody is saying it does not'. This comes across as an admission forced out of someone in denial. (It is better to respond that the claim or insinuation is 'exaggerated' and stick to that wording throughout refutation. For example, 'You have suggested that racism is rife in the police force but that is a great exaggeration and unfair to almost all officers.' The word 'exaggerated' simultaneously says that some of the problem exists and points out what is wrong with the exaggerated claim.)

Exaggeration can be by:

- **Exaggerated descriptions:** This often uses words that imply an approximate but incorrect quantity. For example, a person who is slightly taller than average might be described as 'towering' or 'huge'.
- **Over-generalization and cherry picking:** This might involve saying something is true of everyone in a group when you only know it is true for some of them. A variation is to describe one extreme member of a group and imply they are typical.
- **Over-reaction:** This usually involves a strong reaction to an unimportant incident. For example, a trivial insult might be described as a violent attack and reacted to with highly emotional words and body language. Sometimes people over-react by repeatedly bringing up the grievance, to imply it is important.
- **Catastrophizing:** This involves predicting a very bad outcome from a small indication. Sometimes the claim is that someone's action is just the first of more in the same direction. For example, a request for five extra minutes to give a presentation might be met with 'Oh, so you want everyone to wait while you talk on and on for the rest of the day!'
- **Linking small issues to big issues:** The tactic is to say a small issue (e.g. a harsh word to an old person) is just part of something big (e.g. large scale neglect of old people). This gives the small issue a stronger emotional charge and greater significance while repeating the claim that the bigger issue exists.

E.g. The battle over 'wokeism' has provided many illustrations of exaggeration. A common ploy by the 'woke' side is to over-react to trivial incidents or statements, claiming they are evidence of serious, widespread hatred or bigotry. A common ploy by the 'anti-woke' side is to cherry pick extreme claims by the 'wokeists', critique and ridicule them, and imply that the extreme behaviour is typical.

Lies and selective truth

This category includes telling lies and lying by omission. Lying by omission is a powerful and widely used trick. A slanted picture can be presented by mentioning evidence that favours your position and not mentioning other evidence.

Another way to lie by omission is to let people make natural but wrong assumptions.

E.g. Imagine you are driving somewhere unfamiliar and run out of fuel. You ask a local person if there is a petrol station nearby. They say there is one just around the corner. You thank them and set off only to find the petrol station is derelict. The local has tricked you for a laugh at your expense by omitting something they should have mentioned, allowing you to make the reasonable but false assumption that the petrol station would be operating.

Fake evidence

Lying has been taken to an advanced level in the form of fake evidence. Detailed information is presented that looks genuine and objective but isn't. Often the material looks like rigorous scientific work by competent, well-qualified people. It may be hard to discover the underlying truth. These are some types of fake evidence:

Astrourfing: This relatively modern technique creates a false sense of 'grass roots' opinion online. It includes fake customer reviews of a product or show, and fake comments on political issues on social media. An individual can create many accounts online to make it seem that many people hold similar views, or pay others to do it.

Fake research data: Very occasionally researchers make up data they did not collect or alter their data. This is probably done most often to get published without doing difficult work. Even when the intention is not to distort, this can happen because the author makes up data that seem true to life (which usually means consistent with the theory they favour).

Systematically biased research method: More common than fabrication of data is research using a systematically biased method. This is not always accidental. Examples include decisions to stop a medical trial because favourable results have been achieved and not do the planned follow up phase, dodgy policies on what to do with people who drop out of trials, and use of statistical tests that have in-built bias (such as tests for 'normality' of distributions).

Selective literature review: This pseudo-scientific document can be styled impressively, packed with accurate information, and yet highly misleading. Literature favourable to the advocate's position is included but other literature is left out. The most favourable numbers from the most favourable studies can be put forward as

representative. Flaws in supportive research can be ignored while contrary research, if mentioned at all, is criticized extensively, creating a sense of scepticism. This works even if the individual criticisms are weak (e.g. saying the sample size could have been larger, that there might have been some bias in sample selection, or that something is not explained in the study report even though, if usual practice was followed, there would be no weakness to worry about).

Sustaining apparent controversy

Another trick that can look like scientific debate involves raising a series of seemingly learned objections to research and, when each one is debunked, simply moving on to the next without conceding that the objection was wrong. The fact that the objections are debunked does not stop this tactic from being effective because the real objective is to create the appearance of a controversy.

This is useful to a trickster who wants to create doubt and delay. During the 20th century, tobacco companies funded this type of activity to delay restrictions on their activities. People who want to stop vaccines from being used also find it useful because doubt is all they need to put at least some people off vaccination.

Fake reason

Tricksters often try to appear to use reason themselves. Many overused tricks today are fake reason and fairness. Today, even the most bigoted religious zealot is happy to say 'Show me the evidence'.

Attacking reason itself

A particularly common form of trickery today tries to neutralize the power of reason and fairness by tactics such as claiming that:

- science and logic are just social constructs;
- science is just another cult;
- opponents are biased, prejudiced, and narrow-minded;
- opponents are racist, sexist, or trying to suppress someone's culture, religion, etc; and
- opponents are lying, especially fabricating evidence.

Relativism

Zealots have also learned to use relativism. A religious zealot might complain about criticism by saying 'You're suppressing my right to religious freedom!' as if even baseless religious beliefs are as valid as any others. Relativism is also used to deny differences between people that are real.

E.g. Imagine that A physically attacks B, B defends himself, and then A and B are fighting. The trickster may say that, since both are fighting, B is just as bad as A and so A should not be blamed or punished.

Cultural relativism is used to argue that a person who criticizes the behaviour of another must be a bigot (even if the complaint is about behaviour that is violent, unfair, over-controlling, and intolerant).

Demographic disqualification

Another fashionable trick is to say that your opponent is not qualified to talk on a topic because of not being in a particular demographic group. For example, some people will argue that white people have nothing to offer on the subject of race, that men have nothing trustworthy to say about women, or that old people cannot possibly understand what young people are going through³.

The Gish Gallop

The Gish Gallop is a long stream of often-flawed arguments delivered quickly. Unpicking the arguments takes a long time and bores most audiences, which is why this ploy can work in debates. Not all Gallops are deliberate ploys. People sometimes bundle points without explaining them well because they think that makes a strong argument or they are angry.

Other psychological tricks

There is a large research literature on persuasion and compliance. One of the most famous lists of compliance mechanisms is from Robert Cialdini (1987): reciprocity, commitment and consistency, social proof, liking, authority, and scarcity. This is not an exhaustive list. All these can be exploited in various ways. There has also been much research on so-called 'nudges'.

The common factor is exploitation of our psychological flaws to gain compliance to requests that might not be rationally and fairly deserved.

Abuses of power

Using power means using your resources to apply rewards and/or punishments, or to restrain people physically. However, many uses of power are abuses of that power.

If power is used to impose something unfair or untrue then it is an abuse of power. If the power used is excessive, then it is an abuse of power. Threatening to beat someone up if they don't hand over their wallet is unfair and excessive.

However, some uses of power are abuses because of the nature of the tactics used. This goes beyond physical power and often involves abusing relationships. Abuses of power are discussed below.

Exploiting relationships

Friendships are good and important in life. What is not good is exploiting friendships.

³ This is particularly unfair because old people have once been young but young people have yet to be old.

A good friendship is usually based on establishing a pattern of voluntary mutual cooperation, reciprocal helping, and sharing rewards. Purely social factors (e.g. having similar interests, similar backgrounds, other friends in common, and enjoying the same kind of banter) help form and cement such friendships but are not enough on their own.

Most of us recognize such good friendships and recognize exploitation. For example, we recognize the charming, good-looking sales professional who confidently works the room, distributing business cards. We recognize the smiling politician with the firm, dry handshake who looks us in the eye and really seems to be listening. We feel uneasy with the person who thinks they are good with people as they ask us about ourselves and use our names more often than is natural. We notice when someone matches our body posture too closely and emphasizes similarities with us too much in conversation. We feel let down when 'friends' who are happy to drink with us do not reciprocate practical help.

Problems begin when real or apparent friendship is used to ask for a favour that is against the law, unethical, contrary to our duty within an organization, unprofessional, or unfair for some other reason. For example:

- Meeting a 'friend' to discuss his company's services instead of meeting someone else from a rival company, even though both companies seem equally suitable.
- Buying something from a 'friend' even though it is not the best deal for your company.
- Giving someone a job because they went to the same school as you.
- Finding an excuse to move a 'friend' to the front of a queue.
- Not arresting a fellow club member for driving while drunk.
- Voting for someone mainly because they once shook your hand in a nice way.

Sweeteners

When a person has influence over a decision made by an organization, they may be offered a personal reward (i.e. a sweetener) for influencing the decision in a particular way.

A bribe is a sweetener considered serious enough to be illegal. A bribe might be an offer of money to someone in return for helping to get their company or government to buy from a particular supplier. In some countries bribes are still so common it is hard to operate some businesses without paying bribes.

However, even in countries with strict rules against bribery, sweeteners are common.

E.g. If a person pays business expenses using their own money (to be reimbursed later) then they may be influenced by loyalty schemes such as air miles or other points. Their purchases on behalf of their employer are influenced by rewards they personally receive.

E.g. Some companies offer a free gift with business orders (e.g. for stationery). The gift is usually something that might conceivably be useful in an office but, since it is not charged for, I suspect that some employees simply take it home for their own use and this is the seller's secret expectation.

E.g. It is common for salespeople to arrange meetings where buyers will enjoy hospitality such as food, drink, and watching sport. The sweeteners are to influence the buyers' decisions about whose representatives to speak to.

E.g. A man or woman trying to get a job might use their sex appeal to influence interviewers. The recruitment choice might be influenced if interviewers would like to have someone hot-looking at their workplace.

Feigned social dominance

Another approach is to exploit unconscious primate politics. The advocate tries to appear socially dominant using body language and props suggesting power and success. If this position of dominance is accepted, even briefly, they are more likely to get compliance with their requests. Body language techniques include the following:

- A strong looking posture.
- Low blink rate and low body movements generally.
- Not reacting to or looking around at other people.
- A firm, almost crushing handshake that rotates so that the victim's hand is turned palm up.
- Choosing dominant seating, typically at the head of a table or in a larger or higher chair.
- Occasionally holding a firm eye gaze, perhaps a little longer than is natural.
- Breaking eye gaze sideways rather than downwards (which would signal deference).
- A low-pitched voice.
- Getting the last word in an argument by finishing your final statement with a descending pitch.

Body language can be supported by props like expensive clothes, jewellery, cars, buildings, and signs of celebrity status like an entourage.

Guilt tripping

If a person harms another then it is usually fair that they make amends if they can. It is normal to feel guilty as part of this.

However, our feelings of guilt can be exploited by repeatedly mentioning the bad thing we did, prompting feelings of guilt, and asking for more concessions. It is even

possible to make some people feel guilty where guilt is not deserved. These include (1) acts by their ancestors, by some others in their demographic group, or by the ancestors of some others in their demographic group, (2) being luckier than others, (3) being more successful as a result of talent and hard work than others, and (4) acts that harmed others but were fair (e.g. a juror correctly finding a defendant guilty).

There is a fine but important line between making a moral point (relying on fairness) and moralizing. Making a moral point should allow the other person to conclude that they have acted unfairly or want something unfair, based on the facts, causal relationships, and effects you have explained. Moralizing goes beyond this to ram home the unfairness, perhaps also exaggerating it and basing unfair demands on it.

E.g. Imagine two women are out walking their dogs together and chatting. One has a diesel car. The other explains that fine particulates from diesel cars are now known to be dangerous to health. Petrol is better. Electric cars are best of all. She explains a recent estimate of the number of life years lost across the country each year due to diesel fumes. This is a moral argument because the diesel owner's car is contributing to deaths. However, it is not moralizing. This is just sharing information that car buyers should know.

But suppose that the friend went further and talked about how she thought diesel owners were 'disgusting because of their callous disregard for the lives they are taking by driving their stinking vehicles'. That would be moralizing.

Shaming and ridicule

These methods try to create the impression that the victim is viewed poorly by others and is a bad or inadequate person. Shaming and ridicule can be used in private to hurt someone, distract them, demoralize them, or intimidate them by showing what will happen in public if they do not comply. Shaming and ridicule can also be used in public.

Ridicule is common when the topic of conversation is politics but also used elsewhere.

An example of shaming is 'You are disgustingly fat and I can't believe anyone is going to want to go out with you.' An example of ridicule is 'Are you planning to wear that? It makes you look like a giant red balloon.'

The line between shaming and influencing with sound reasoning can be a fine one but crucial. Saying someone is 'disgustingly fat' is shaming. Saying 'I can't believe anyone...' is also shaming. However, it is not shaming to say to a resilient and practical friend who is struggling to find a romantic partner something like 'It's obvious, I know, but if you could lose some weight then you probably would get more interest.'

Smear tactics

This is acting to damage someone's relationships, social status, or reputation by false allegations, suggestions, or insinuations. Smear tactics are usually used in

public but in private they may be demonstrated as a threat. Smear tactics can be used to:

- intimidate people into compliance;
- damage the credibility of opponents who stand in the way of the aggressor;
- distract opponents from influencing by forcing them to defend themselves instead;
- damage a position by smearing individuals associated with it; and
- remove people from powerful roles or stop them getting those roles.

Smear tactics are common in politics but also in business and other contexts. Relational aggression (which includes smear tactics among others) among adolescents has been intensively studied by psychologists.

Smear tactics are most effective when they use claims about the victim that are hard to disprove. For example, at work it is usually more effective to criticize a person's 'social skills' or personality than to criticize their performance. It can be effective to say that someone said or did something in a private situation. There may be no independent proof of the claim to substantiate it but neither is there anything to disprove it.

It is usually more effective to make the damaging claim without the knowledge of the victim, preventing refutation. The claim may become a generally accepted fact by the time the victim knows about it, with the original source hidden. A perfect character assassination does its dirty work without the victim ever knowing what happened.

Insinuation can be used instead of an explicit claim. The aggressor may pretend to divulge the damaging claim reluctantly. Perhaps one claim would be ignored but a series of insinuations over time gives each more credibility than the last.

Familiar forms of smear seen often on news media include:

- Ascribing to a person the views of some of their followers (e.g. an author has some 'alt right' readers so the author is an 'alt right' person).
- Describing someone who only speaks the truth fairly as 'controversial' because they have loud, aggressive, dishonest opponents. Here there is no controversy because nothing whose truth is unclear has been said. The bad behaviour is by the aggressive opponents defending their position by any means possible.
- Linking a person to something they said or wrote decades ago with no acknowledgement that they have, or may have, changed their views since or that the view or phrase was common at that time.
- Using past associations, such as saying that a person once met someone bad and, therefore, they were bad then and still are. This can even make use of a person's parents (e.g. insinuating that a person is a fascist because their father was, 50 years ago).

- Taking past comments out of context or simply misrepresenting or misunderstanding them to manufacture a smear.
- Immediately misinterpreting and misrepresenting a person's words, perhaps prefaced by the infamous phrase 'so what you're saying is ...'

Sometimes a person's entire past published output is thoroughly searched for snippets that can be used as smears. This is completely different from cautious, legitimate analysis and critique of the substance of past statements.

Exploiting voting mechanisms

Voting is an important mechanism in most Western societies and better than tyranny. However, it has significant weaknesses and can be exploited.

A well-known problem is that some voting mechanisms map votes to power in a distorting way.

E.g. UK general elections map votes to seats in the House of Commons. Mathematically, it is possible for a party that has only minority support in every constituency to gain all the seats in parliament. All they have to do is win one more vote than the next party in each constituency. Parties can gain by having their support concentrated in particular constituencies. Mathematically you could come second in every constituency but gain no seats even though more people overall voted for you than for any other party. The same total number of votes unequally distributed could have given you a landslide victory.

The actual effect of the UK's mechanism seems to be, typically, to amplify differences in support between the leading two parties and crush other parties.

Also in the UK, the party in power can appoint people to the House of Lords. They tend to appoint people who think as they do and appoint as many of them as they can. Those Lords stay in place long after the party that appointed them has lost power in the House of Commons.

A more general problem with voting is that, when voters choose according to their personal interests (which they don't always do), there may be little distinction between very large and very small impacts. If many people would gain a little from a change but a few people would lose a lot then that change can get most votes. It's unfair for the badly affected minority.

Another general problem is that not all voters are as informed, thoughtful, rational, and objective as they might be. Some voters are easier to influence with underhand tactics than others.

Success can also hinge on who was present and able to vote on the day. This is a particular hazard with committees but in large political elections it is normal for parties to call on their voters to make sure they have voted and transport people who might have struggled to reach the polling station. The timing of a vote can be important if it favours voters for one side.

You can also manipulate voting if you control the options put to a vote or the timing of the vote. In some cases it is even possible to ignore the results of a vote and have another vote, and another, until you get the result you want.

Misusing delegated power

Many people have a role in an organization that gives them power. This power is to be used only for the legitimate purposes of the organization so it is a misuse of that power if it is used for anything else, such as bullying people to get what the role-holder personally wants.

Relying on just rules

An approach that often feels moral but does not involve fairness is to apply rules instead of fairness. Rules are used appropriately within fairness when they encode the conclusions of deep deliberation for efficient, consistent application in similar future situations. Also, rules can require consideration of the impact on people, which promotes fairness. However, using rules *instead of* fairness is different.

Types of rule include laws (with many different sources and types), industry regulators' rules, codes of conduct, contract terms, and commandments in the sacred texts of religions or based on them.

'Human rights' are also rules (though usually rather vague). When someone says they have a 'right' to do something that may mean it is in a list of rights or just that they think there is no law against it.

Applying rules is not always easy. It may be hard to decide which rules are applicable. Rules may contradict each other. They may be ambiguous or vague.