

## **PART 2: EXCHANGES**

## Chapter 6: Conversational exchanges

Having discussed various factors that make use of reason and fairness more or less likely, the factor that should now be your focus is your personal determination to use reason and fairness. Assuming you are at least interested, it is time to look in detail at exactly how to do it.

The advice in this chapter supports all influencing activity. It applies at all times to the small building blocks of influence – individual sentences and paragraphs – written or spoken. It relates to things you say in discussions, on social media, in emails, texts, and to the small parts of longer explanations.

There is no need to have a good awareness of your situation or to consider context or overall strategy when applying the advice. In later chapters these basic skills remain applicable but will not be mentioned again. It will be assumed that you are getting these basics right.

If you learn nothing else from this book, these fundamentals will still make a huge difference to your influence and the way people see you.

### Guidelines for contributing

The following guidelines aim to:

- make valuable contributions (relevant, factually correct, logical); and
- avoid provoking unhelpful responses from others.

### Focus on logic and facts

The characteristics, motives, and methods of other participants in a discussion can be important but our primary focus should be the content of the discussion, especially logic and facts. The best way to know if someone is right or wrong about something is to think about the content rather than about them. Often you do not know what the overall conclusion should be but you can still build up correct reasoning from reliable facts and debunk incorrect reasoning and incorrect factual claims.

E.g. Most people who celebrated the end of the second millennium did so at the end of 1999. They were a year early. The first year CE was labelled 1, not zero, so the 2000<sup>th</sup> year was labelled 2000. The end of 2000 was the end of the second millennium. Simple mathematical reasoning establishes this beyond doubt. The

fact that most people, including governments, were wrong does not change this. It was not a conspiracy, just a widespread error that gained momentum.

E.g. In the years before 1 January 2000 a vast effort was made to check and correct computer code that used year numbers assumed to be in the 1900s. This problem was sometimes called the 'millennium bug' and became famous, with many people warning of catastrophes that could happen if the code was not checked and corrected in time. In the end there were very few bad outcomes from the millennium bug and this led some people to mock the software world, saying there had been nothing to worry about all along. This must have been annoying to the thousands of programmers who had worked for months or even years on the bug and made the vast number of corrections necessary for software to continue functioning correctly. Instead of being praised as heroes for averting problems they were mocked incorrectly for fussing about nothing.

The characteristics and behaviour of discussion participants can give only clues to who is right and who can be trusted to cooperate. If a participant speaks quickly, repeatedly uses rhetorical tricks, lies, abuses power, and lives in luxury funded by people who believe him then he is probably wrong and a poor source of information. Conversely, a person who lives modestly, is endorsed by recognized experts and people with high authority, has an objective tone, speaks slowly and carefully, and cites supporting literature at every opportunity is probably right and a good source.

However, these clues are not as reliable as analysing what people say because liars know the superficial signs of reliability and do their best to show them.

E.g. When a large scale health scam goes up against governments and the medical establishment both sides will look superficially similar. Both will have:

- Some speakers who appear to be experts by education, qualifications, job title, or personal experience.
- Some speakers who make technical mistakes or get caught being deceptive or colluding to be more persuasive.
- Websites, documents, videos, interviews, conferences, and books. Often these have impressive titles, technical language, and long lists of citations (though in the detail some are less reliable than others).
- A story about how the other side is conspiring to deceive people and why.
- Many supporters.
- Many arguments they want to make.

Only by going into the detail of each argument can we establish who is right. This is what we must do.

E.g. Health scams base almost every argument on some grain of truth, twisted to create unreasonable doubt. For example:

- People who do statistical analysis for drug trials are typically forbidden from talking about what they do. This can be presented as suspicious – perhaps a cover up. The real reason is that information about trials can have a large

effect on share prices and information made public must be controlled strictly to prevent insider trading.

- Many medical tests are unreliable in the sense that most people who test positive in fact do not have the disease. This can be presented as evidence that the tests are useless or a fraud. In fact even with a very good medical test a high proportion of false positives is normal if the true rate of the disease in a population is very low. The lower the true rate the higher the proportion of false positives. Tests still provide valuable information for medical decision making.

It is not necessary to know who is right to make valuable contributions; just contribute reliable facts and good reasoning, and debunk flawed reasoning and unreliable claims. This moves us towards better conclusions.

Some inference errors are far from obvious but once they are pointed out they are easier to understand. We must think carefully and widely.

E.g. Imagine a writer claims that immigration into a particular country is beneficial for that country. They cite research showing that the estimated net financial contribution of immigrants to that country over the previous 10 years was positive. Most people would not notice the error here. Is it something in the details of the estimates? Perhaps, but we do not know enough yet to say. Is it the choice of time period? No. It is something bigger and more fundamental.

The problem is that the effect of immigration depends heavily on the policies that decide who can enter a country. If a country is selective enough then immigrants will have a positive impact. They will be more productive, better citizens than the average already in the country. Also, their impact due to sheer numbers (affecting housing costs for example) will be easier to accommodate. It is meaningless to say 'immigration' is beneficial or not. The analysis must be of immigration with a particular set of rules about who can enter. Otherwise, research allegedly showing immigration per se was beneficial might be used to argue for increasing immigration by relaxing the rules, resulting in a different impact.

It is better to focus on logic and facts about the content of a discussion than to discuss the character of others in a discussion. Discussing character is usually a distraction. It is also often difficult to know why people behave the way they do. Someone who seems evil may have noble motives but a serious misunderstanding.

## Reveal only appropriate emotions

When issues are important most people feel emotional from time to time and showing this can help if properly controlled. You might show happiness or excitement at the good prospects of a course of action, or concern at bad prospects. You might show frustration that a problem still has not been solved. In general, showing emotion can be a powerful way to help people understand when you are saying something important and so get them to focus on what you are saying.

Be careful not to allow emotion to undermine your reasoning, especially the words you use. It should not cause you to exaggerate or use emotive words with implications that are not true. It should not divert you into name calling attacks on

difficult, unhelpful people when a focus on the reasoning involved would be more effective.

Sometimes people think they must either use logic or use emotion to influence others. It is also quite commonly thought that emotion beats logic most of the time. However, there is a third option, which is to use both logic and emotion. It is best to use logic as the solid basis for emotion and as the spur to action.

## Make valuable contributions

Your contributions to a discussion should be as well-reasoned and fair as possible. Be factual, precise, and logical. Avoid loose language and unintended implications. Ideally, follow a sensible pattern of analysis or explanation, which may be the one already in progress in a conversation.

Do not try to make contributions that only support one conclusion. Trying would be biased. You might still find that all your points support one conclusion but that is not the same as trying to do so from the outset.

Say something worthwhile. (Questions are discussed in a later section.) In the following list of valuable types of contribution, the first two are usually easier to get right:

**Relevant facts:** Many discussions benefit from basic factual context; stating those facts, showing a graph, or providing a link to information will usually be helpful. Online it is polite and helpful to identify sources with a hyperlink. If the source is not available online then give a reference to the publication.

**Highlighting facts in a source that others have so far overlooked:** Sometimes a discussion is about a source document but not everyone has even looked at the document, let alone studied it carefully. It can help to pick out specific points from source documents.

**Offering alternative explanations:** Sometimes it helps to suggest an alternative explanation. Clearly say it is just another possibility unless you think it is the correct explanation or probably is.

**Explaining alternative courses of action:** Where a decision on action is needed it often helps to explain one or more alternative courses of action, especially strong contenders so far overlooked.

**Sharing insights and inferences:** Any other thinking you think is relevant, correct, and not already well known and attended to can be shared to provide value.

**Identifying and explaining errors:** These might be factual errors or reasoning errors.

**Offering better words:** If someone has tried to express something but not quite captured it correctly, or if their idea needs a modification, you can try to restate it in better words.

**Identifying points of agreement and disagreement:** In a cooperative discussion it may be possible to explore ideas thoroughly. Clarifying where there is agreement and disagreement helps do this.

**Positive procedural contributions:** These help keep the discussion relevant and productive. They might, for example, summarize points made, suggest or clarify the objective of the discussion, clarify options in a decision, ask if anyone has information relevant to a particular point, or establish who will speak next. Positive procedural contributions are particularly useful when a discussion is becoming muddled.

There is some limited but encouraging evidence that making positive procedural contributions produces better meetings, even if you are not the chairperson. Lehmann-Willenbrock et al (2013) recorded and coded team meeting behaviours, looking at what happened after people made procedural contributions to the meeting. The positive types were these:

<b>Sample statement</b>	<b>act4teams® code</b>
All right, back to the topic.	Goal orientation
So essentially you're saying that...	Clarifying
Let's talk about ... first.	Procedural suggestion
Should I write that down?	Procedural question
That's the most important issue we're facing.	Prioritizing
And we should come to a decision; we only have five minutes left.	Time management
Anna, please take notes on the flip chart.	Task distribution
(A writes on flip chart)	Visualizing
Ok, so far we've talked about ....	Summary

Across 59 team meetings at 19 organizations, they found that positive procedural contributions by team members increased productive contributions and inhibited dysfunctional contributions – especially when everyone made positive procedural contributions from time to time. These left people feeling more satisfied with the meetings.

In another relevant study, Schultz et al (1995) trained groups in a decision-making procedure and appointed someone (not the leader) to be the 'Reminder' and keep people following the process. (The Reminder provided the positive procedural contributions.)

The training helped produce good decisions (compared to a control) and the Reminder role increased that benefit.

Martyn (2006) studied a single board of directors in detail, looking at the impact of training in a decision-making method combined with a Reminder role. In general the

directors liked the approach and thought it helped them even though they did a lot of it already. However, the researcher was not allowed to observe meetings to measure changes in decision-making quality.

## Check facts

You can make a valuable contribution simply by checking claims made by others in a discussion and reporting your findings. Either you can confirm them, expand on the detail, or explain where the claims are wrong. Provide a reference or link to your source(s).

Checking is not an insult. Anyone can make a mistake or be misinformed. Checking is a courtesy. Just do not report problems found in an insulting way.

Also, it is vital to minimize the number of false claims you make, so check facts you are not completely sure of and give references or links to your sources. If you cannot check a claim you are not sure of, then do not make it; say something you are sure of instead.

Do not allow tricksters to put you off by saying you are wrong without a specific reason, but do be aware of the possibility of error and be willing to check and correct your reasoning.

## Do not claim more than you need

Do not make careless claims that are not quite correct (taken literally or otherwise) or stronger than you need and hard to justify. They distract listeners and give opportunities to derail the conversation.

Stay within your intellectual ability, do some research (online usually), and make sure what you say is correct by being cautious in what you claim.

E.g. Imagine people are arguing about how many people are overweight but nobody in the discussion has given any numbers. You could search for some online then contribute them to the discussion, explaining the source and what the numbers represent: 'According to the Health Survey for England in 2019, 68% of men over 16 and 60% of women over 16 were overweight or obese (i.e. BMI of 25 or more).' You are saying what the Health Survey says, which you can do with certainty, not asserting the true figure for overweight people. Others in the discussion might object to defining 'overweight' using BMI. You are not taking a position on that; just offering some relevant data. Others might be interested in children or those who are obese, not just overweight, or in other countries or other points in time. (NHS Digital has more on these questions so you could make further valuable contributions using this source.)

Take care to avoid careless over-generalizations.

E.g. In a debate about poverty some people will usually argue that everyone who is poor now is poor because of unfortunate circumstances. At the other extreme some will argue that all poor people are poor because of their own bad behaviour. In reality, poverty is the result of both circumstances and behaviour and the contributions of each differ between people. Do not write careless statements

with implied over-generalizations such as 'If the poor just pulled their socks up they would not need handouts!' or 'If you spent less time in your posh office and more time with needy people you would know their poverty is genuine.'

Do not make more points than you need because the more points you make the higher the probability that at least one will be wrong, reducing the credibility of your other claims. It is also more likely that someone will think a correct point is wrong and the discussion will not give you a chance to correct that view. Again, your credibility will be reduced.

## Be precise

Others are often antagonized by carelessly imprecise claims. In particular, avoid:

- generalizing inaccurately about groups of people; and
- over-simplifying causes.

E.g. The statement 'Men think they are better drivers than women' will antagonize most men, especially those who do not think they are better drivers than women. The generalization is about a group of people and, as is almost always the case, not true of everyone in the group.

E.g. The statement 'Men have more driving accidents than women because they are, on average, more aggressive drivers than women' avoids generalization by using 'on average' but is still aggravating because it ignores other causes of the higher male accident rate (e.g. that men, on average, drive more miles per year than women). Causation has been over-simplified, making the claim inaccurate, unfair, and annoying to at least some people. It is extremely rare for differences like this to have only one cause.

These are just two of the most common mistakes. In general, precision is crucial.

## Be clear, concise, and prefer plain English

Use clear, concise, plain English. Do not use long sentences. Do not ramble off the point, even to be friendly or entertaining. This makes your contributions easier to understand and reduces misunderstandings. Usually your contributions will be shorter too.

Many people suspect errors or tricks when a communication uses unfamiliar terms unnecessarily or is otherwise hard to understand.

E.g. Here are some alternative ways to say the same thing:

- Plain: 'Because of the pandemic many people have died early. Monthly deaths in the UK have been much higher than in previous years during each wave of the virus, but a bit lower in between waves. The low points are because people who would have died in those months died earlier.'
- Technical/jargon: 'Because of the pandemic average life years have been reduced. Excess mortality has been much higher during viral infection waves but marginally lower in inter-wave periods. This inter-wave decrement is because of higher incidence of premature death during wave phases.'

- Amiable rambling: 'Because of the pandemic many people have died early. By the way I have just come from London, visiting my parents, and they are in good health. But, of course, when you think about the impact on people of their age it's quite sobering. You can see that if they were to die early their deaths would appear in the statistics. Anyway, to get back to the point ...'

There are several excellent guides to writing plain English so this chapter will not go into more detail.

Take care to avoid typos when writing by checking before you finalise your contribution.

Speak clearly and slowly. The pace used by Sir Winston Churchill in his famous speeches from 1940 is about right, though his language is sometimes hard to follow and his speech is at times a little slurred.

Try to anticipate and prevent misunderstandings that might cause angry reactions. In an extreme case you can include direct contradictions of likely misunderstandings. In the following example the words designed to head off predictable complaints are in bold:

E.g. 'The choice of nightclubs, from October, for vaccine passports seems particularly appropriate. It provides an incentive to get vaccinated for a group of people where non-vaccination is likely to be more common i.e. people who go to nightclubs and are young, hedonistic, self-centred, and not particularly thoughtful. **I'm not saying that everyone who goes to nightclubs meets that description or that all unvaccinated people meet that description. I'm saying there's a worthwhile overlap.** In comparison, the value of the incentive would be tiny if you said people had to be vaccinated to use a public library or enter a National Trust property. Such a requirement would exclude very few of the usual visitors.'

## Look the part

Make sure everything about your style, from your font choice to tone of voice, says you are a clear-thinking person and a champion of fairness. It is fine to show emotion provided it reinforces that point.

E.g. If you have estimated that over 1,000 people die each year in the UK because of some problem then it is only natural to show your emotion non-verbally when delivering that information, clearly and precisely, without spin or slant.

## Control your flow of new points

In the context of a complete discussion, you may make many points but must carefully control when each is introduced.

Do not make too many points too quickly. Stay focused on key points until they have been understood, responded to, and little more value can be extracted from them, or it is clear that they will not be understood or get a reaction. This stops people going off in new directions too early. If you are trying to make an important point

and mention something tangential then people will often respond to the tangential remark, taking attention off the more important points.

Do not pursue too many points raised by others. If someone raises several points in one contribution then decide which to respond to and which to leave, at least for now. Focus on the main issue at that moment and make a valuable contribution.

Repeated attacks on you (e.g. on social media) are an opportunity to make several contributions in response that gradually introduce and develop themes. Respond to each attack in a way that lets you build on your themes each time rather than get dragged off topic.

## Do not antagonize unnecessarily

If someone is rude or aggressive in a conversation, in writing or face-to-face, it is extremely tempting to hit back in a similar style, especially if others are doing it, and especially if your friends, allies, leaders, or role models are already doing it, or usually do it. That temptation should be avoided for four important reasons:

1. Tricksters often try to divert a discussion into a row rather than let you continue laying out facts and logic. Antagonizing them provides an excuse.
2. Insulting, aggressive, insincere statements are not logical or efficient. They waste time and energy.
3. It reflects badly on you and your points. If you argue on a familiar issue with established sides then your unpleasant behaviour damages your side's reputation and weakens your arguments, even if your side is correct. People being unreasonable often do so because they think others are bad people. If you antagonize then you reinforce this belief.
4. It can damage relationships with people unnecessarily. The other person may have noble aims but be mistaken.

There is no need to avoid making points that are relevant, correct, and logical, even if some people get annoyed (e.g. because their mistake has been pointed out). Anyone can make a mistake or be misinformed. It is helpful, not rude, to critically evaluate what people claim and point out errors. It is part of being a good participant in a discussion. Unnecessary antagonism is quite different and should be avoided.

Removing all unnecessarily antagonizing elements can create dramatic improvement.

E.g. A person wants to argue online against religiously motivated circumcision of babies and boys in a discussion that has focused on its health effects. The first draft reads: 'It's all very well to talk about the health issues around mutilating children but what about the pain and trauma they suffer? To ignore this is cruel and typical of religious zealots – always more worried about keeping their sky-daddy in a good mood than in taking care of real people.' The generalization about religious people and the red-mist words 'mutilating', 'zealots', 'cruel', 'ignore', 'sky-daddy', and 'good mood' are unnecessarily antagonizing. Using the argument about the reactions of a supernatural being was not necessary because the discussion was already focused on real harms. In contrast, the second draft

reads: 'Alongside the health effects of circumcision we should also consider the pain and fear suffered during the operation and the discomfort afterwards. These are considerable. When I saw a video of the procedure I felt sick.'

E.g. A person is arguing against planning permission for a new home and has identified something wrong in one of the planning drawings. The unnecessarily antagonizing version is: 'Once again this developer is trying to pull the wool over the committee's eyes with a sleazy trick. The front elevation shows the adjacent buildings, making them look the same height as the proposed building. In fact it will tower over them by more than 2 metres and be an eyesore in the road. No doubt their friends on the council couldn't care less but this disgusting behaviour needs to be punished.' This approach would put the developer and most of the council on the angry defensive.

In contrast, a version that avoids unnecessary antagonism and will get a more productive reaction is: 'The front elevation unusually includes outlines of the adjacent houses, making them appear to be the same height as the proposed building. I established yesterday by measurement that the proposed building would be more than 2 metres higher and higher than any other building in that road. I have amended my copy of the drawing to show the actual heights of the adjacent buildings – like this.' This focuses on the key points at this stage and shows the committee the true height comparison. The trick probably was deliberate but it may be better to give listeners a chance to realize for themselves.

On social media, many postings about controversial subjects are insulting and perhaps some people do not notice when they are insulting. We need to go into detail to understand the problem.

Behaviours can be unnecessarily antagonizing in various ways. Some involve acting dismissively, as if the other person is unimportant. Examples of this are:

- Writing online postings with lots of SHOUTING CAPITALS, emoticons, and EXCLAMATION MARKS!!!!!!!!!!
- Swear words.
- Ridicule, knocking humour, incredulity, sarcasm, and false politeness.
- Interrupting, unless the other person has been talking for much too long.
- Responding to a well-argued point with a simple contradiction. (Responding to a point that has little or no support with a simple contradiction is proportionate, not dismissive.)
- Saying the other person is wrong without saying why or offering to explain why.
- A long list of points made to one person without waiting for a response.
- Repeating your points without responding to the other person and without developing or clarifying your messages.

- Ignoring questions that are reasonable and relevant when there is nothing else outstanding for response.
- Not conceding points. For example, having been shown to be wrong it is aggressive to just move on to a new topic without explicitly conceding your mistake.
- Tricks and abuses of power.

Many unnecessarily antagonizing behaviours involve saying or implying that the other person is stupid, ignorant, or otherwise mentally deficient. Some examples are:

- Explicitly saying they are stupid, ignorant, etc.
- Telling experts things they are certain to know already, as if you think they don't know them.
- Choosing interpretations of things people say that show you think they are stupid and are saying stupid things, rather than looking for interpretations that would be sensible. This is also the 'straw man' trick.
- Telling people they are ignorant when they are not, directly or by telling people to get an education, learn the basics, or offering them a reading list when they haven't asked for one.

Here are some phrases to avoid and better alternatives:

### **Red mist words**

'Simplistic', 'over-simplified', e.g. 'Your description is simplistic.'

'Sloooooowly' e.g. 'I'll say this sloooooowly.'

'Obvious', 'clearly', 'blatant', 'ridiculous', 'lunacy', 'mad', 'crazy', 'fixated', 'obsessed', 'stupid', 'idiotic', 'deluded', 'blinker', 'myopic', 'dense', 'dim', 'thick', 'mis-guided', e.g. 'The idea is ridiculous.'

'Wake up', 'realize', 'finally realize' (followed by an obvious or familiar claim).

'Forgotten', 'neglected', 'ignored' (when the reality is that the opponent has considered the issue).

### **Plain alternatives**

'Partly incorrect', 'missing an important detail'.

There is no alternative. Don't do this at all.

Either say nothing or say that something is 'wrong' or 'incorrect'.

There is no alternative. Don't do this at all.

'Not mentioned', 'not given sufficient weight to', 'may not have considered'.

In general, do not suggest that others are mentally deficient unless you know they are, it is relevant to the discussion, and you can demonstrate it clearly.

Another way to get people seeing red is to suggest they are dishonest. This can be done explicitly or by seeming to jump to the conclusion that someone is lying, suggesting that lying is normal behaviour for the other person. Here are some examples of aggravating words with better alternatives:

**Red mist words**

'Misleading', 'a narrative', 'disingenuous', 'lying', 'deceptive', 'spun', 'economical with the truth', 'guilty of terminological exactitude'.

**Neutral alternatives**

'Incorrect', 'not correct', 'wrong', 'inaccurate', 'not accurate', 'only partly correct', 'partly incorrect'.

Another type of antagonizing behaviour involves tapping into existing conflicts between demographically defined groups. This is common in the UK today and often involves words that have been misused so often they are now never helpful. These words include:

- The phobias: homophobia, Islamophobia, xenophobia, and transphobia.
- The demographic –isms and –ists: racism/racist, sexism/sexist, white supremacism/supremacist, Islamism/Islamist.
- The political –isms and –ists: fascism/fascist, Nazism/nazi, nationalism/nationalist, jingoism/jingoist, leftism/leftist, globalism/globalist, elitism/elitist.
- Others: libtard, elite, liberal elite, soyboy, apologist, fundamentalist, extremist, hard left, hard right, far left, far right.

These words have a nasty feel that goes beyond their factual content and insulting false accusations. Often they are used as exaggerations.

In the table below I give typical words and some factual but less inflammatory alternatives. Do not use the words on the left and do not use the phrases on the right unless sure they are deserved and the point must be established. Never use these to describe large demographically defined groups of people because they are almost never true for everyone in a large group.

**War words**

**Plain alternatives (only if justified)**

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Racist, xenophobe, Islamophobe, homophobe, White supremacist.

- Anti-X prejudice e.g. 'anti-white prejudice'.
- Anti-X hatred

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Nationalist

- Someone who has some pride in their nation.
  - Someone who wishes to put the interests of his/her nation ahead of those of other nations to an extreme degree.
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<b>War words</b>	<b>Plain alternatives (only if justified)</b>
Jingoistic nationalist	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Someone who has some pride in their nation and is willing to support war against another nation or against terrorists, if there is a threat.</li><li>• Someone who has some pride in their nation and is willing to support war against another nation to take control of their territory and keep it.</li></ul>
Fascist	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Member of a group that calls itself Fascist.</li></ul>
Nazi	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Member of a group that calls itself Nazi.</li></ul>
Elite	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Rich and/or powerful person without personal material worries, probably living in an area with high property prices, and rarely meeting people who are not also elite.</li></ul>
Liberal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Someone who thinks equality of opportunity is very important in societies.</li><li>• Someone who thinks equality of outcome is very important in societies, and inequality of opportunity is acceptable if it is helping to achieve equality of outcomes.</li></ul>
Libtard (short for liberal retard)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Someone who thinks equality of outcome is very important in societies, and inequality of opportunity is acceptable if it is helping to achieve equality of outcomes, and who thinks the UK and other Western nations are deeply plagued by a patriarchy and many white racists.</li></ul>
Soyboy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• A male person who sees traditionally masculine characteristics as bad and acts in a feminine way.</li></ul>
Apologist	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• A supporter.</li></ul>
Leftie/leftist	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Someone who agrees with most of the things that left wing political groups currently promote.</li></ul>
Islamist	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• A person who wishes to see Islam imposed on others.</li></ul>

Do not use any of the antagonizing words related to prejudice and hatred and do not accuse someone of anti-X prejudice/hatred unless you are sure it is true and worth doing.

For an attitude to be truly 'anti-X prejudice' it needs to be an *unfounded* negative view applied to *all* members of the group X. In other words, a person with this attitude holds the view towards every member of X and does not change their view appropriately as they learn more about people. Here are three ways this can happen:

- The person fails to update their assessment of an individual appropriately given new information.
- The person fails to update their assessment of the whole group appropriately given new information.
- The person fails or refuses to gather more information (in a situation where assessment matters enough to justify gathering more information) or gathers more information in a deliberately biased way.

For an attitude to be truly 'anti-X hatred' it needs to be an *intense* and *irrational* dislike that *continues regardless* of the behaviour of the person hated and is felt towards *all* members of the group X. It might involve an enduring desire for revenge, for example, or a desire to exterminate or push away the whole group X even though they now appear to pose no threat.

Judging what is irrational requires an understanding of what is rational. It is normal and rational to be wary of strangers. There are many people in the world who are aggressive, unpleasant, dishonest, unstable, or dangerously inept. It makes sense to be cautious with new people and then adjust as we learn more about them. We might become more relaxed or more concerned and even fearful, perhaps willing to take action to resist them or defend against them.

None of this is irrational or deserves harsh criticism or sanctions. Those other people might turn out to hate you because of your religion, skin colour, or poverty. They might want to take your money at knife point because they think it's easier than working for a living. Caution based on statistical generalization is logical as an initial stance provided we make an effort to learn more and change our views as a result.

## Guidelines for responding

The following guidelines aim to:

- constructively respond to and encourage valuable contributions by others;
- neutralize and discourage unhelpful contributions by others.

### Listen and read carefully

Not all contributions others make, written or spoken, are worth close attention. Some are incomprehensible, tiring, based on mistakes, or blatantly manipulative. Often they are just one more useless contribution in a long series. It is not necessary or efficient to pay careful attention to every contribution made by others.

Other contributions are worth attention. They may include useful information, ideas, reasoning, or corrections. They may be wrong but close to the truth and so worth restating to make a valuable response. They may be incorrect or insulting taken literally but your response could rephrase them to make a useful contribution. Close attention may give you a better understanding of why someone is wrong and make it easier to help them.

E.g. Suppose in an online discussion of higher education someone posts 'Is a prestigious job important? If everyone took an advanced degree in ecology and regenerative cultures then we could create a better society. Can it be more prestigious than that?' Taken literally this is a silly suggestion. If everyone took an advanced degree in ecology and regenerative cultures then most people would fail the course and there would be nobody trained in construction work, farming, food preparation, childcare, medicine, and so on. It would be disastrous. Your response might be 'An advanced degree would be impractical but I can see the advantages of teaching more about sustainability, ecology, and how to be a good citizen. That could start from primary school so everyone knows at least some basics.'

## Welcome valuable contributions

If someone else makes a valuable contribution then thank them and say what was good about it. This includes valid corrections of your claims.

E.g. 'Thanks for pointing out that I misquoted Mark Twain.'

E.g. 'Oh, that's interesting. Those statistics look relevant and helpful.'

E.g. 'Thanks Sandra. That was a very useful point. I have learned something from you.'

You might also want to ask them a question for more information or for better understanding. If they have made one valuable contribution then perhaps they will make more. All this encourages valuable contributors to do more.

Responding positively to valuable contributions encourages people to use reason, at least when we are involved in a discussion.

## Scrutinize but do not challenge

Scrutiny is careful checking and evaluation. It may involve making sure you have not misunderstood what the other person is trying to say. It may also involve probing for reasoning that has not been provided but might be relevant and for missing or flawed reasoning. Scrutiny is directed at finding potential flaws in the facts and reasoning; it does not involve putting the speaker under psychological pressure. Scrutiny should be done calmly and patiently, giving the speaker time to think if necessary and the opportunity to make corrections.

In contrast, challenge usually involves aggressively scolding the speaker in some way to see their reaction. Challenge often does not give the speaker time to think and sometimes takes the discovery of errors or even the speaker's delays in replying as evidence that the speaker's contributions should be ignored.

Scrutiny helps get to the truth. Challenge produces an argument rather than cooperative thinking.

The focus of scrutiny should be the facts and logic involved, not indirect (and unreliable) indicators of the credibility of the other person's contributions such as their expertise, experience, authority, citations used, motives, or personality.

## Give feedback on understanding and agreement

Speakers usually like confirmation that their messages are being listened to and understood, and hope they have also been accepted as correct. Provide that confirmation if you can by what you ask, say, and with body language.

The challenge is to make clear what you are confirming. You can be separately unsure of your understanding and their correctness. These are the main possibilities:

- You are sure you do not understand
- You are not sure you understand
- You are sure you understand
  - but not sure if they are correct
  - and sure they are correct; or
  - sure they are wrong (on at least one point)

Sometimes body language will be enough. Look puzzled unless you are sure you understand. Nod only if you understand and you are sure the speaker is correct. For anything else, speak to explain the exact situation.

E.g. 'I understand what you are saying but I am not sure it is true that the scheme will be popular among younger people.'

A good way to check your understanding and reassure the speaker is to summarise or restate what the speaker has said and ask if you are correct.

E.g. 'Are you saying this scheme will be popular among younger people because they are bored?'

If the other person makes multiple claims and you respond to one of them then there is a danger of ambiguity. If you disagree with one claim does that mean you accept the others or will soon be disagreeing with more? If you agree with one does that mean you agree or disagree with the others? Removing the ambiguity reduces the risk of the other person over-reacting.

E.g. 'You made several claims, some of which I will need to think about more before I respond. There was one point where I know I agree and I can give you an example of exactly that from my own experience. It was ...'

E.g. 'You had quite a few points there and in general I think you are right and I agree. However, there was one point of fact where I think what you said was not correct. You said that ...'

E.g. 'There were several points there that are not completely correct but I want to pick up on one key mistake...'

You may also need to make clear if you think their point is wrong or potentially right but unproven.

Often, providing this feedback can be combined with welcoming a valuable contribution and making one of your own.

E.g. 'I understand what you are saying about the scale of the work and I agree it will take more than a month. However, I think a team of four dedicated people is likely to complete more quickly than the larger team of part-time people you suggested. People tend to stay on a task if they do not have competing work.'

## Express reasoned scepticism

Often when someone makes an implausible claim you will not be certain it is wrong. Respond by expressing scepticism respectfully, with reasons as far as you can. This will usually introduce a request for information or explanations.

Sometimes the unlikely claim will be true.

E.g. Here is an imaginary conversation where another person says something hard to believe and you question it.

Other: 'And in the UK, young Black people are 24 times more likely to be murdered than young White people.'

You: 'That is a huge difference and seems unlikely to me. Can you say more about where that figure comes from?'

Other: 'It comes from a report by the Commission on Racial and Ethnic Disparities, published in 2021. The figure specifically refers to Black victims of homicide versus White victims aged between 16 and 24 in the UK during the 2018/19 reporting period. The authors got this from a paper by Kumar, Sherman, and Strang, published in 2020.'

On other occasions your doubts may prove justified.

E.g. Another hypothetical conversation.

Other: 'Only 7% of our message is conveyed by our words. The rest is conveyed by our body language, including intonation.'

You: 'That seems unlikely. If I imagine watching the TV news with the sound turned off, I think I would understand very little of its messages but if I read the text of the news, I would understand it perfectly. Can you say a bit more about the basis of the 7% figure?'

Other: 'Umm, it's well known. Body language is really important, isn't it? Everyone knows that.'

You: 'So, not a specific study that you can explain or refer me to? And you don't know how the 7% was measured.'

Useful phrases include 'unlikely', 'implausible', and 'hard to believe'. It can also be useful to ask for and compare subjective probability numbers. Sometimes people are reluctant to express their probability, thinking it is an objective fact and they need statistics to answer. This is wrong but the explanation for why is lengthy. Instead, just ask for their 'subjective' or 'personal' probability and if they still resist then say 'well, if you had to bet ...'.

## Tackle over- and under-confidence

Often a discussion is about the right level of confidence rather than whether something is true.

E.g. Court juries are asked to consider if the prosecution case is proven beyond reasonable doubt. The discussion is really about how confident they are in guilt. This means they might think someone is more likely guilty than not, yet still return a verdict of 'not guilty'.

E.g. Professor Richard Dawkins is one of the world's most famous atheists. He does not say there is no god. He says his probability that there is a god is extremely small. Like the claim that a teapot too small to be seen by a telescope orbits the sun, he cannot disprove it but it is still extremely unlikely to be true.

E.g. Arguments about whether a vaccine is 'safe' flounder because all vaccines carry risk. There are always a very few people who react badly. We can always wait a few more years to see if problems emerge in the very, very long term. People happy to get vaccinated typically think the probability distribution of harm is less worrying than the probability distribution of harm from not getting vaccinated. They usually think the chances of the vaccine seriously harming them are very small – say 1 in 10,000 or better. People who are not happy to be vaccinated often see the probability distribution of harm from having it as very threatening – maybe a 1 in 4 chance of serious illness or even death. For an approved vaccine such a high probability is irrational.

Sometimes people are less certain of something than they should be. This is common when statistical evidence indicates a very high level of certainty. More often people are more certain than they should be.

Premature certainty can be tackled by first establishing that an alternative is at least possible, even if it seems remote. If alternative explanations can be worked out then they make a possibility more credible.

## Ask questions for information or understanding only

Questions can be valuable in a discussion but can also be inappropriate and cause defensive reactions. Questions can be used to elicit relevant information that has not been volunteered and are especially useful in understanding the circumstances of people affected by a decision who are not particularly articulate or willing to speak up.

However, questions can produce negative reactions. Often a question's effect depends on the context. Most people are comfortable with the following:

- Being asked for explanations or other information when they are experts either because of qualifications, experience, or because they have worked to learn about the topic.
- Being asked questions for clarification by someone who is sincerely unsure or confused and wants to understand.

- Being asked simple information questions as part of an administrative process (e.g. being asked for your name and address when joining a club.)

In contrast a special relationship is needed for these types of question:

- Detailed questions about things we usually keep private such as sexual relationships and feelings. This is usually reserved for psychotherapists, psychiatrists, and close personal friends already given permission for such questions.
- Detailed questions about actions and motives, often repeated. This is the questioning we might expect from a police officer interviewing a suspect and trying to test the truth of their statements.

People are also wary of questions asked during challenging discussions because they may be designed to lead thinking, reveal an inconsistency, make disguised claims, or elicit a damaging admission or something that can be presented as such. They may also suspect that questions are designed to gain compliance through fake consultation.

So, take care to ask questions only when you really want the information or you think other people in the discussion do, and consider explaining the reason for asking to reduce needless defensiveness. People are least likely to be defensive in response to questions about data, but may need reassurance for questions about:

- definitions they are using
- their reasoning, and
- the sources of their empirical claims.

E.g. To introduce a question about a definition you might say something like 'I am surprised we seem to be disagreeing on this but I wonder if we are using different definitions. Would you like to say a bit more about what you think counts as "violence"?'

E.g. To ask about the source of a claim you might say 'You said the rate was 23%. That is a lot higher than I have seen before so I wonder if you could say more about how that was arrived at or perhaps just provide a link to the study so I can have a look at the details.'

Questions can also be used to test a person's reaction to hypotheses and courses of action or elicit facts about their preferences.

Questions for information and understanding may reveal helpful areas of agreement. However, when asking questions, you should also avoid giving an impression of agreement when you do not agree (yet).

E.g. You might say 'I am not sure how to respond at this point because I am not entirely sure I understand what you are saying. Would you like to explain your reasons a bit further?' If you just asked for more reasons it might seem, from your lack of disagreement, that you agree so far.

Unfortunately, some people have such incoherent and poorly defined thoughts that asking questions to clarify them is a waste of time. You learn nothing useful, they rarely notice their mistakes, and the conversation focuses on what they are saying instead of on good sense clearly explained.

## Answer questions only with valuable contributions

When asked questions – even hostile, attacking questions – answer with a valuable contribution to the discussion. If you cannot make a valuable contribution by answering the question then do not answer it and make a valuable contribution some other way.

E.g. Suppose you have suggested a course of action and someone else wrongly thinks it is a stupid idea. They ask 'Oh yeah? So who is going to decide what is appropriate then?' What they mean is that it is not possible for anyone to decide what is appropriate and this is a fundamental problem with your suggestion. A good response to this is to answer the question by explaining who would decide what is appropriate (it might be a number of people in various ways) and how they could do it.

Some questions are designed as traps to make someone look bad. These are classic TV interview questions for politicians:

- **Unrealistic demands for certainty:** The idea is to make the politician look uncomfortable and perhaps induce a promise that later may not be kept due to unexpected problems. E.g. 'But Minister, can you guarantee that the vaccine programme will not be delayed by supply problems?', 'Is the war on schedule?', 'When will government debt be reduced to the level it was 3 years ago?'
- **Unrealistic expectations of information:** The idea is to make the politician look ignorant or incompetent by asking for specific numbers that are not available to anyone. E.g. 'How many people have entered this country illegally in the past 20 years?'
- **Unrealistic memory tests:** Once again the hope is to make the politician squirm uncomfortably, this time by asking for more and more detail until something is asked for that the politician has never known or cannot remember. E.g. 'So, how many people from Afghanistan were granted asylum in the UK in March last year?', 'In your plan for the police force, how many new officers are due to be transferred to fighting fraud in the North East?'
- **False choice between unpleasant options:** The aim is to make the politician appear to welcome one of the two options. E.g. 'Which would you prefer between increasing homelessness and reducing provision for the elderly?'

These questions can be answered in a way that makes a valuable contribution but politicians often struggle or look evasive when they refuse to answer the question.

E.g. A worthwhile answer to the question 'But Minister, can you guarantee that the vaccine programme will not be delayed by supply problems?' might be 'We have had a lot of calculations done on this under many different scenarios. The conclusion was that the chance of delay to the schedule we originally set out is

negligible.’ The valuable contribution is to give more detail on how the assessment was made (i.e. scenario analysis) and the degree of certainty.

E.g. An answer to ‘In your plan for the police force, how many new officers are due to be transferred to fighting fraud in the North East?’ might be ‘Even the overview of the plan contains several pages of numbers and there are also ranges and contingencies, so that’s a lot more detail than I can reliably recall for you today. When the plan was developed, we went through several iterations and a rigorous process to understand what would have to happen in practice to achieve the results we are now predicting. I know we increased resourcing for fraud because this has been a growing problem and needs more attention.’

## Respond to claims before questions

Sometimes people make claims just before, or even as part of, asking a question. These claims may be explicit or implied. They are sometimes incorrect or worded misleadingly.

When this happens it is important to respond to the false claim first. If there is a valid question still to be answered after that then the question can be responded to.

## Neutralize personal attacks and continue

When others in a discussion attack you personally it is usually best to neutralize their attack briefly but firmly and then carry on without getting distracted from the important issues. Resist the temptation to complain about their rudeness or tactics.

A major goal with many argument tricks is to get you off topic and/or emotional so the discussion is inconclusive. This protects someone who is wrong from the full impact of reason.

It is also possible that the other person has noble aims but is mistaken. If you complain about them, they will feel aggrieved and be antagonized unnecessarily. You need a response that works regardless of the other person’s motives.

The fundamental pattern for responding to personal attacks is to neutralize the attack briefly then continue sharing valuable points. A short link may be useful between the neutralization and the continuation. Your continuation might be restating your points, elaborating them, extending them, or progressing to new points.

E.g. Suppose you are discussing a proposal to build a large road near your home and someone attacks you personally saying ‘You are a fascist and a liar, and nobody should take any notice of anything you say about the proposed road.’ Your response might be:

Neutralize: ‘I am not a fascist and not a liar...’

Link: ‘... but I am concerned about the impacts of this proposed road ...’

Continue: ‘... which I set out in my submission and, in summary, are as follows. First, homes will need to be demolished ...’

This contrasts sharply with the ideal response to a valuable contribution, which might involve praise for the contribution, feedback on understanding and agreement, and perhaps building on what has been said. With the neutralize-link-continue pattern there is no soft opening; the response begins with neutralization, often by simple contradiction.

The power of this pattern is extraordinary and it is a mistake to try other tactics. Whenever you struggle to decide how to react to a personal attack, come back to this simple pattern: neutralize-link-continue. Almost anything else will require more thinking, work less well, and leave you feeling more stressed. The simplicity of always reacting in roughly the same way and never getting drawn into a whirl of complicated personal attacks is calming.

For example, if you explicitly refer to, and even itemize, evidence of an opponent's bias then this invites the opponent to accuse you of being biased in return. Reality might not matter to them. It is better to just nullify the tactic and get back to the proper content of the discussion.

If someone launches multiple attacks in one contribution then just neutralize the worst one and continue as usual. If you respond to more than one attack point then you could get dragged off course. If someone's attack is an insinuation rather than an explicit claim then neutralize the insinuation because it is their real attack.

What you say when neutralizing must be true so it is crucial to avoid doing things that others might fairly criticize.

With this pattern of responding, every time your opponent tries a trick they open the door to more of your sound reasoning. That is the last thing they want. It is much better for them if you get led off the point and start trading insults. Every time you describe the rigorous approach of your analysis there is an implied contrast with theirs. Every time you grind through pros and cons of your suggestion it contrasts with their one-sided approach. Their tricks become a liability for them.

Ultimately, the goals of responding this way are to discourage unfair behaviour and promote good quality discussion based on reason and fairness.

### *Neutralize using the worst specific fault*

The exact form of your neutralization should reflect the mistake(s) in the attack:

**False claims:** If the attack makes a false claim about you then contradict it. You can do this directly (e.g. 'I am not a fool') or with a contradictory positive claim (e.g. 'I am well informed on this topic').

**Irrelevant claims:** If the attack is irrelevant to the discussion then point this out (e.g. 'I am over 50 years old but that is irrelevant. I can still understand official statistics about young people, which is what we are discussing here.').

**Flawed logic:** If there is a problem with the logic of the attack then point it out (e.g. 'Yes, some people who have read my book are idiots, but that does not make me an idiot. A lot of people have read my book.').

While reading the suggested responses on the next few pages you may feel that some are too direct and might be seen as rude. The hard reality is that, to neutralize

attacks effectively, you must be firm and undeterred by negative reactions. The personal attack is the source of the rudeness and is being used to shut you up. If you neutralize correctly and avoid unnecessarily antagonizing people then your responses will be much less rude than the attacks you are neutralizing.

### *Neutralizing attacks on your personality*

Some attacks are nasty, insulting, extreme, or create the fear that others might actually believe them, so the temptation to launch an extended defence is strong. In reality, incorrect claims with few or no reasons behind them can be neutralized quickly and easily by just contradicting the point they are really trying to make.

Many tactics used to attack a reasoner's personality try to turn the strengths of reason into weaknesses. This includes complaining that precision is pedantry and that logical reasoning is heartless.

- **Tactic:** Telling you to stop contributing because 'everyone' is fed up with your contributions. You are boring, stupid, insufferable, etc.  
**Response:** 'I'm focusing on making contributions that are valuable to this discussion.'
- **Tactic:** An ad hominem attack that says you are a pedant, nerd, or boring person.  
**Response:** 'This is not pedantry. The issue is important because ...'
- **Tactic:** Falsely complaining that your use of reason/logic/rationality is cold and unfeeling, that you are not a proper human being, and that if you had feelings, you would say something different.  
**Response:** 'I have feelings and I care. That's why I'm doing my best to think this through properly.'

Skilled reasoners may find themselves in a discussion with people who are not so skilled or as dedicated to reason. In that one respect they are superior and this again can be twisted into an attack. The attack is more effective when the reasoner is upset by the idea that they might have appeared insulting to others. Often the idea of the trick is just to cause the reasoner to hesitate or become reluctant to contribute. The attack of 'patronising' is particularly effective in this respect because a person who has been genuinely kind in a conversation might worry that this has come across as patronising.

- **Tactic:** Unjustified accusation of 'conceit' or 'arrogance'.  
**Response:** 'There was no conceit/arrogance. The logic is straightforward: <say it again>.'
- **Tactic:** Unjustified accusation of being 'patronising' or 'condescending' prompted by an error being pointed out.  
**Response:** 'I was not patronizing/condescending. You made an error by repeatedly saying that ... and I pointed it out, as gently as I could.'
- **Tactic:** Unjustified accusation of being 'patronising' or 'condescending' prompted by you repeatedly explaining something that they seemed not to understand properly.

**Response:** 'That was not patronising/condescending. I am trying to explain, as clearly as I can, because so far I have not seen strong evidence that you understand the mechanism/point. [You say you understand but then continue as if you do not.]'

A similar type of attack arises from a person's annoyance at being shown to be wrong. They are annoyed so the reasoner was rude, hostile, aggressive, oppressive, repressive, or persecuting. Their objective is to get the reasoner to stop.

- **Tactic:** Complaint that you have been rude or offensive, prompted by valid criticism of their mistakes.

**Response:** 'I'm not insulting you. I'm pointing out your mistakes so they can be reduced. [Those mistakes are having a bad effect on me/others.] Specifically, ...'

- **Tactic:** Complaints that you are somehow being rude, inconsiderate, insensitive, or unfriendly for raising an issue at all. This is being used to divert a discussion away from matters of fact, fairness, or performance that might otherwise be damaging to the tactic user.

**Response:** 'This is not a sensitive issue but it is important. The situation is that ...'

- **Tactic:** Complaints that you are dogmatic used to try to stop you going through all the reasons for a conclusion, or all the reasonable objections you have.

**Response:** 'There's no dogmatism here. I just want to make sure all the reasons for this have been understood. So far we've talked about ...'

The tactic is sometimes strengthened by suggesting that they or others involved are vulnerable in some way (e.g. mentally fragile, easily frightened, young, neuro-diverse) so you must stop talking.

Another type of attack says you are a horrible person because of a decision or action you have taken.

- **Tactic:** Complaint that you have ignored them, not listened, been high-handed, dictatorial, fascist, authoritarian, undemocratic, probably illegal.

**Response:** Depending on the circumstances a response might be 'You were not ignored but there are also other people who are affected by this. I weighed everyone's interests before acting.'

- **Tactic:** Complaint (perhaps tearfully) that your decision or action has made them or someone else upset.

**Response:** 'I know this is not what you wanted but I have done X because Y.' or 'I know this is not what you wanted but it was done for the many good reasons already explained.'

- **Tactic:** Complaint that you have caused the suffering of someone weak (e.g. a child, disabled person, elderly person, their mother).

**Response:** 'That suffering is not the direct result of what I have done. It is the direct result of X.' or 'This upset is temporary and will soon be forgotten. The reasons for doing X were Y.' or 'That can be alleviated, so if you give me details I'll see that it is looked into.'

A familiar contemporary attack is to complain that the reasoner is a hater. On social media and news media, attacks of this kind are seen all the time. Being a person with an irrational hatred or fear of people in some demographic group is, rightly, seen as a bad thing but the accusation is often made incorrectly. A simple but effective response pattern against incorrect accusations of hate is: 'I'm not X. It's not X to ...'

- **Tactic:** False accusation of racism, sexism, etc.

**Response:** 'I am not racist/sexist/etc. It's not racist/sexist/etc to ...' e.g.

'examine the practical problems caused by large scale immigration because they need to be tackled for everyone's sake', 'examine the possible dangers from some people who are strongly committed to that ideology', 'criticize you personally for making a mistake'.

Some people who use this type of attack are fluent and unrelenting. They take innocent behaviours as evidence of hate, take denial of hate as further evidence of hate, and sometimes allege hate on the basis of nothing more than a person's demographic characteristics (e.g. a man must be a misogynist, a white person must be a racist). They maintain that the hate is unconscious and due to unappreciated societal structures or processes. Nothing you can say will convince them otherwise but you can communicate with observers.

The contradiction that starts the response (i.e. 'I am not X.') will not be enough on its own. The determined attacker, if given a chance, will maintain that you are an 'X' and just do not realize it. You must continue with the next part of the response (i.e. 'It is not X to ...') to explain what you are saying in a way that shows observers you are being fair. You might expand on this with a 'because ...' to explain further.

E.g. 'I am not racist. It is not racist to recognize the obvious differences in appearance between people from different parts of the world because recognizing racial differences does not mean a person wants to treat a race badly. They might want to provide extra help or recognize cultural differences.'

E.g. 'I'm not transphobic. It's not transphobic to occasionally forget that you are not a man. It's an easy mistake to make because you look like a man, act like a man, and sound like a man.'

For this to work your explanation must be correct.

E.g. A response that does not work is 'I am not sexist. It is not sexist to say that a woman's place is in the home.' This fails because it generalizes across women and does not acknowledge variations in circumstances and their freedom to choose. It is sexist. A similar response that works is 'I am not sexist. It is not sexist to say that some women prefer to look after their own children rather than do paid work elsewhere and have someone else look after their children.' This merely states a fact and acknowledges freedom to choose. It is not sexist.

In responding to all these personal attacks, it is much easier to respond quickly and confidently if you have taken great care to avoid the mistakes the attacks allege.

### *Neutralizing attacks on your competence or objectivity*

There are several types of attack in this area. One involves taking small errors or limitations in your thinking and saying they fundamentally damage your credibility or argument.

- **Tactic:** Find some unimportant fault and claim it invalidates a whole argument.  
**Response:** 'It does not matter to the overall argument whether .... What I said was that ...'
- **Tactic:** Pushing you for details you cannot remember. Trying to make you look weak for not having every fact available.  
**Response:** 'I did this analysis some time ago and it was detailed, systematic, and careful. Today I can't remember the names and titles but I could search them up for you and let you know after this meeting. What I remember is my conclusion and the main reasons for it, which were ...'

Another type of attack is based on claiming you are just giving opinions. If you have been using reason and selecting evidence fairly then you have not been giving your opinion; you have been doing much more. This seemingly gentle type of personal attack is particularly dangerous and opens the way to attacks claiming your thinking is unreliable.

- **Tactic:** Saying your arguments are just opinions e.g. 'that's just your opinion', 'your opinions are insufferable.'  
**Response:** 'What I said was more than an opinion.' Then explain the reasoning again or go into more detail about the work done to reach the conclusions stated earlier.

An interviewer might try to insert a claim that your contributions are mere opinions within a question. The smear about opinions is so important it should be responded to before answering the question.

E.g. Suppose an interviewer attacks with 'You have written a number of books in which you give your opinions; you also interview people for your podcasts. Which do you prefer, giving your opinions or interviewing?' This might be answered with: 'Before I come on to your question, I must make clear that my books are much more than collections of opinions. I do a lot of research to get facts and I share those with readers, along with careful reasoning. I also try to provide insights and original proposals for action. So, these are much more than just opinions and more valuable as a result. That effort to use evidence and reasoning is fundamental to what I do. I take on topics that many people do not reason about objectively, I take a deep breath and calm myself, and I work patiently and carefully through the information and the logic. Some people get upset with me but the emotion is coming from them. I am not provoking them. Usually the truth is not what they want and I make it harder for them to get their way. In answer to your question, I enjoy all my work so long as it supports progress.'

There are other attacks that also claim your reasoning is fundamentally flawed or limited. Some are attacks on reason itself.

- **Tactic:** Falsely claiming you don't understand anything they are saying because they are working in a new paradigm.

**Response:** 'I understand what you are saying, which is quite simple. You are saying ...' Alternatively, 'What you are saying is not really that new and I understand enough of it to see some serious logical difficulties. These include ...' Or, 'I have taken a careful look at your paradigm and I understand its key ideas sufficiently to know that it is wrong. I want to explain what the problems are.' Or, 'I have taken a careful look at your paradigm by studying the original sources and commentary on them. I understand its key ideas sufficiently to know that it is wrong. The main reasons are that ...'

- **Tactic:** Complaining that your rationality is just an arbitrary choice and that you are imposing your notion of rationality on others.

**Response:** 'There's nothing arbitrary about sound reasoning. You can't make up other rules. Sound reasoning is what works with systems you can't plead or bargain with, like your computer, a car, or a river. In this case ...'

There are several types of attack that claim bias, often linked with saying you are only giving opinions. The idea is that opinions are more susceptible to biasing influences. If you have stuck to logic and facts, and selected evidence fairly, then these claims are just personal attacks and should be neutralized quickly.

Bias claims are dangerous because it is hard to say your thinking is completely unaffected by bias. However, bias claims open the door to explaining how you did your research.

- **Tactic:** Saying you are biased, perhaps also suggesting a reason for that.

**Response:** 'If I'm biased at all it is unlikely to be a significant factor because of the way I did my research. To minimize bias in my analysis I ...' Alternatively, 'You greatly exaggerate the threat of overwhelming bias. I have looked at some good studies of the issue in detail and would like to explain what they tell us.'

Other attacks hint that your conclusions are driven by a psychiatric condition. The attacker might say you seem 'obsessed' or 'fixated' on something, or that you have a 'compulsion'. These are psychiatric terms and hint at mental health problems. The attacker might ask you questions about your childhood or family as if searching for some traumatic event that made you a crazy person.

- **Tactic:** Hinting your actions or ideas are driven by a mental health problem (when they are not).

**Response:** 'What I am saying is not driven by a psychological issue. I want to make a positive contribution, as we all should, and I rely on rationality and evidence to do that. To be specific, the reasons ...'

Some attacks focus on vested interests you allegedly have. If you do have the vested interest then you need to be confident already that you have stuck to reason and not been influenced. If you do not have the vested interest then you can say so.

- **Tactic:** 'How can we take anything you say seriously when you are being paid by the company concerned?'

**Response:** 'There has been no fraud. The information I have presented is factual'

and gathered in just the way I have described. It shows that ...' Alternatively, 'I am not part of a conspiracy. I am an expert in risk management and I have been doing some careful research on the topic we are discussing today.'

Another angle is to say you are biased because of who you know, or have met, or who went to the same school, college, or workplace.

- **Tactic:** 'Of course you would say that. You two were at school together!'  
**Response:** 'There has been no cover up here. Actually, I don't remember him from school but even if I did it would not be relevant. The information I have presented comes from an independent source and is the most comprehensive set of relevant statistics available. It shows that ...'

Your demographic characteristics might also be the basis for a claim of bias, perhaps saying that you cannot understand the issues because you are the wrong race, sex, or class. Living with others requires us to understand the situations faced by other people who are nearly always different from us in several important ways. It is a basic skill, so saying someone cannot do it is a serious insult.

- **Tactic:** 'As a middle-aged white man you can never understand what we are going through. You need to step back.'  
**Response:** 'No, I am having no difficulty understanding the issues you are describing. What we now need to consider is the practical significance ...'

Sometimes the idea that you cannot comment because you have the wrong demographic characteristics is only implied. The person might say 'Speaking as a ...' or 'My lived experience tells me ...' in the hope of making their words more credible relative to others and discouraging criticism. There is no need to respond directly to this but if the ploy is continued then you may need to make one of these points:

- Personal experiences can be unrepresentative of a larger group (useful if you have some survey statistics to offer).
- People sometimes misunderstand some of their personal experiences, perhaps misunderstanding the reasons for something happening.
- Sometimes personal experiences are the result of a person's behaviour (e.g. a person who hates children and is often hostile towards them might think that children are unfriendly because that is what they often see).

Another attack is to say you are biased because you have previously made statements supporting a position. This might be used against an expert who really does know the truth already to try to get them excluded from a discussion.

- **Tactic:** 'How can you be objective when you are a well-known advocate of earlier retirement?'  
**Response:** 'Knowing the evidence from earlier studies does not bias me. I have in the past explained the overall advantages of earlier retirement after thinking about the issues and evaluating the latest evidence. I will have no difficulty evaluating the latest evidence again and I'm open to other conclusions. Having said that, if the evidence still points towards earlier retirement I will not be surprised.'

This can be combined with attacks based on who you know or what groups you belong to.

- **Tactic:** Accusation that you are in a group, perhaps secretly, that supposedly cannot be trusted e.g. you are a covert Zionist.  
**Response:** 'It doesn't matter who I am. What matters is the evidence and logic that I have provided.' or 'I am not a ...' followed up with 'What I said was ...'

Another attack designed to make you hesitate and perhaps stop contributing is this one.

- **Tactic:** Saying you are too sure of yourself.  
**Response:** 'What I'm confident of is the value of sound reasoning. I have spent a long time thinking about this and the conclusions are supported by multiple lines of reasoning.'

People who disagree with you may take your apparent views as conclusive evidence that you are a bad or stupid person. Even less logically, they may use an association with someone else as the evidence. For example, if you hate jazz and Adolf Hitler hated jazz then that makes you just like Hitler in every respect. They might then try to build on this by claiming bias.

- **Tactic:** Saying you are a bad or stupid person because you are on the same side of an argument, or voted the same way, as some people who are bad or stupid.  
**Response:** 'I am not a bad or stupid person and it is irrelevant that some bad or stupid people voted the same way as me. What matters is the best information and reasoning we can find, not the worst. For example, ....'

Some very common attacks imply you are stupid or evil by misinterpreting what you have said. They may guess that what you mean is something silly and then criticize you dismissively for saying something you did not say, showing they think you are foolish. A variation is to misinterpret and then wrongly dismiss your explanation as obvious or nothing new. Or they may have some existing misconception that leads them to think your ideas are wrong and they put this rudely using a word like 'bizarre' or 'outlandish'.

Possible reasons for these attacks include:

- Past experience, probably with other people, where the reasoning really was silly, obvious, not novel, or evil.
- Their interpretation really is the most likely because you explained the reasoning poorly.
- Over-estimating their own intellect compared to the explainer's.
- The stress they are feeling from struggling to understand.
- Feeling intellectually one-down to the explainer and wanting to get one-up.

This behaviour, whether a deliberate attack or a genuine misunderstanding, is rude, frustrating, and a problem. It indicates that:

- the points are not being understood;

- one or more misconceptions now exist;
- the listener's motivation to continue has dropped very low; and
- the listener's assessment of the explainer is low and it will be hard to increase motivation to continue.

The best response to this is usually simple, clear contradiction immediately followed by an explanation of the key points missed, further reasoning that reinforces the points made, or direct debunking of the underlying misconception. An indirect response (e.g. 'You are right that X but Y.') would only confirm the listener's assessment. An angry response would send the conversation off course. Here are some illustrations:

- **Attack:** 'The paper makes some attempt to explain the model.' (Dismissive of the explanation and the paper.)  
**Response:** 'The paper has 6 pages explaining the model.' (i.e. much more than just 'some attempt'.)
- **Attack:** 'There is nothing new in these proposals.'  
**Response:** 'The new element of these proposals is ...'
- **Attack:** 'The idea of X is a bizarre suggestion.'  
**Response:** 'X is already in operation in several companies and its effect is ...'

### *Neutralizing attacks on your tactics*

Other attacks might focus on your tactics or alleged tactics. The most obvious is a complaint about using a trick or abusing power.

- **Tactic:** Complaining that you are using unfair tactics, such as smearing, or slippery language.  
**Response:** 'There was no <the alleged trick>. I was making a reasonable, logical point, which was that ...'

Attacks may try to portray your strength as a weakness or problem.

- **Tactic:** Complaining that your use of reasoning is unfair because you are much better at it than others or have had longer to prepare.  
**Response:** 'I only want a fair conclusion to this discussion and I'll do my best get it. Ability and preparation just make a fair outcome more likely.'
- **Tactic:** Cunningly praising you as 'persuasive' to suggest that clever wording is the reason that you are influential, not good reasons.  
**Response:** 'If I am persuasive it is because I am trying hard to think logically and fairly, and to express my thoughts for others precisely.'

A common modern complaint is of some kind of coercion, denial of rights, limitation of freedom of speech, authoritarianism, totalitarianism, or just telling people 'what to think'.

- **Tactic:** Accusation of coercion e.g. 'you are trying to impose on others' / 'denying their rights.'

**Response:** 'No, I am not trying to impose or deny rights, but we all have to consider the effects of our actions on other people, even when what we are doing is legal. We were discussing the best course of action and considering the impacts on all concerned. In particular, ...'

- **Tactic:** Falsely complaining that you are telling them what to think.  
**Response:** 'I am not telling you what to think. I am sharing some thinking that I have done, hoping you will understand it and we will make progress.'
- **Tactic:** Falsely saying you are limiting their freedom of speech when they have been swearing or making aggressive ad hominem attacks.  
**Response:** 'You can say what you like, but it's *best* if you stay focused on the issues.'
- **Tactic:** Falsely saying you are limiting their freedom of speech because you explained they were wrong to say something.  
**Response:** 'I have explained that what you said is not true and that saying it could mislead others and so be harmful. That's all.'

### *Neutralizing other personal attacks*

Finally, some miscellaneous attacks that do not seem to fit anywhere else.

- **Tactic:** Warning that something has been ignored when it has not been the focus of consideration for good reasons, or that something has been overly criticized when it has been criticized. For example, 'We shouldn't forget that ...' really saying 'You have forgotten that...' and 'We should not be too hard on ...' used to mean 'You have been too hard on ...'  
**Response:** 'What was actually said was that ...' or 'It hasn't been forgotten by me. I carefully considered that option and it is less attractive because ...'
- **Tactic:** Abuse, perhaps with swearing, smears, and other name calling and ad hominem material – and nothing else.  
**Response:** 'Sounds like you're angry and don't like me, but the topic we are talking about is ...'

### Neutralize simple tricks and continue

A simple trick in this context means one that is brief and isolated with little argument behind it. Because these are weak moves, they can usually be neutralized quickly and without going into much detail.

Longer arguments, such as you might find in a speech, video, or article, where the other person has the chance to lay out a network of tricks, need a bigger response and this challenge is covered in Chapter 8.

The pattern to use for neutralizing simple tricks is the same as for personal attacks: neutralize-link-continue. Again, there is no welcome for a valuable contribution and no feedback on understanding and agreement. If the other person says something valuable but also uses a trick then the trick is usually more important and must be tackled immediately.

Use this pattern to avoid getting dragged off more important points. Get back to sharing the most useful information and insights rather than bickering about side issues.

As with responding to personal attacks, what you say when neutralizing must be true and so it is crucial to avoid saying things that others might fairly criticize.

### *Simple assertions*

One of the most common ways to promote a point is simply to state it as if it needs no supporting reasons. This is only a trick if it is not obvious and the claim needs support in the context of the conversation.

A good response is simply neutralization by contradiction.

Examples:

- **Tactic:** 'X is true.'  
**Response:** 'No it isn't, because ...'
- **Tactic:** 'Your claim that X is just not true.'  
**Response:** 'X is true, for the reasons I gave earlier, which were that ...'
- **Tactic:** A hostile interviewer's question, something like, 'Surely you are wrong to say X?'  
**Response:** 'X is true, for the reasons I gave earlier, which were that ...' or 'X is true, because ...'
- **Tactic:** 'Given that X, then Y.' (Where X is not true but Y does follow from X.)  
**Response:** 'X is not a given and not, in fact, true. The truth is that ...'

A related ploy is to make points that follow from a proposition that either is not stated or is stated without reasons. This is like the final example above, though the given proposition might not be stated. To respond to this, contradict the incorrect assumption and ignore the points made as deductions from it. Simply move on to making correct points rather than spending more time on points that have had their foundation contradicted.

### *Side claims / framing ploys*

Another trick is to use words that subtly add claims to a statement. This sometimes uses 'emotive' language and or is an attempt to channel thinking by framing a situation in a particular way.

For example, a person who is poor (i.e. not wealthy) might be described as 'deprived' which is not quite synonymous. The term 'deprived' suggests that someone, or perhaps a group, has acted unfairly to prevent the poor person from being better off. They have taken something that otherwise would have gone to the poor person. This point about who is to blame for the poverty is a side claim.

Other terms that are not quite synonyms for 'poor' include 'underprivileged', 'disenfranchised', 'disadvantaged', 'working class', 'chavs', 'pikies', 'underclass', and even 'benefit freeloaders'. These all make side claims.

The trick is to take something agreed as factually true, such as a person's poverty, and express it using a word that also makes a side claim, hoping that the side claim will go unchallenged.

The UK's struggle to leave the European Union, fought out mostly between 2016 and 2019, gave rise to a small blizzard of terms that conveyed side claims:

<b>Term</b>	<b>Plain term</b>	<b>Side claim</b>
Hard Brexit	Leaving the EU	A sudden, hard, unpleasant experience
Soft Brexit	Partly leaving the EU	A gentle, easy, less unpleasant experience
People's Vote	Second referendum	A more democratic kind of referendum
No deal Brexit	Leaving the EU using WTO trading rules but without the EU's agreement to the UK and ROI's Northern Ireland border solution	A chaotic exit in which nothing has been agreed with the EU
Bojo	Boris Johnson (UK Prime Minister)	A lightweight celebrity
Brexitteer	Person who wants the UK to leave the EU	A kind of pirate (sounds like privateer), or perhaps a careless person (sounds like cavalier)

A neutralizing response should make the side claim clear and contradict it. Here are some examples:

- **Tactic:** 'The council has ignored the feelings of this community for too long.' (The side claim is that the council has paid no attention to the feelings and this would be an incorrect claim if the council had considered those feelings but other factors were more important.)

**Response:** 'No. The council has considered the feelings of this group several times, along with the feelings of other stakeholders, but also looked in detail at the underlying issues. It would not be fair for us to give your group the priority you seek.'
- **Tactic:** 'More needs to be done to help men get to the top of the speech therapy profession, where they are currently under-represented.' (The side claim made by 'under-represented' is that this is a democratic failing.)

**Response:** 'There are very few men at the top of the speech therapy profession but this alone does not necessarily mean there is a problem.'

- **Tactic:** 'We need a People's Vote to decide if we will leave the EU.'  
**Response:** 'By People's Vote you mean another referendum. We have already had a referendum and most people who voted in it wanted to leave the EU.'

Falsely framing a situation as one of coercion can be tackled quite easily but the best response depends on what is really happening:

- **Tactic:** 'Who are you to tell me I can't have a drink when I want one?'  
**Response:** 'I am not giving you an instruction. I am recommending that you do not drink alcohol because there are good reasons to think stopping will improve your life.'
- **Tactic:** 'Who are you to tell me I can't have a drink when I want one?'  
**Response:** 'I am not giving you an instruction. I am explaining the main reasons why your life would improve if you stopped. So far I have mentioned ...'
- **Tactic:** 'Who are you to tell me I can't have a drink when I want one?'  
**Response:** 'I am not telling you not to drink. I am telling you that in this country it is against the law for you to drink alcohol, against the law for me to help you, and against the law for me to watch you do it and not report it. I could get into trouble if you drink alcohol, so please do not do it.'
- **Tactic:** 'It is outrageous that the government is telling us we cannot smoke in our own homes. It's totalitarian nonsense. A nanny state. It's taking away our freedoms.'  
**Response:** 'This is a legally agreed law for the benefit of society as a whole. This is what governments are supposed to do for us. Sometimes some people need a shove to get them to do things that are good for them and the people around them. You have had years to stop.'

### *Mockery and humour*

Humour is used in a variety of manipulative tactics. Stay serious and do not try to compete on humour or quips. The best response is usually to neutralize what is said or the gist of it.

Sometimes humour is used to get away with something untrue, unfair, rude, or exaggerated. It is 'only a joke' or just 'exaggerated for comic effect.' But it is still wrong and making light of it just makes it worse.

- **Tactic:** 'Wow. I didn't know you were a fully paid up eco warrior.'  
**Response:** 'I am not a warrior. More of a thinker and influencer. I am concerned about sustainability generally and this type of pollution is a major concern because ...'
- **Tactic:** 'Bojo probably thinks she's another of his undiscovered love children.'  
**Response:** 'That's not likely, is it.'

Another tactic is to ridicule a misrepresentation of something said by someone else.

- **Tactic:** 'So, this country is being invaded by millions of foreigners and your solution is to bake scones!'

**Response:** 'No. I suggested clarifying, strengthening, and protecting what is good about our culture and way of life. Other examples include ...'

Other tactics try to stop you contributing by exploiting your desire to be popular and fit in with a group. The attacker tries to make you feel that other people are against you and with the attacker. The words may attack your use of reason by suggesting you are boring, unpopular, nerdy, and pedantic. The humour may provoke smiles or sniggering that make it seem that other people support the attacker and are against you. In reality, some people smiling may still be supportive of your points and there may be others present who are silent and less noticeable. Besides, none of this is relevant to the logic of the discussion.

- **Tactic:** 'What does it feel like to be alone?'

**Response:** 'I am not alone and that is not relevant to this discussion.'

- **Tactic:** 'Uh oh. The professor strikes again.'

**Response:** 'I am not a professor but I have some knowledge of the statistical inference issues in situations like this. What I am saying is that ...'

### *Over-generalizations and other exaggerations*

Over-generalizations usually take an example, or handful of examples, and then assert a strong generalization. Some of these are over-reactions to events.

- **Tactic:** Reacting to a street being renamed: 'Leftists are trying to erase 500 years of British history.'

**Response:** 'This is renaming one street. It's not nothing, but it isn't erasing 500 years of British history. Let's consider the real significance of this ...'

Other common examples are over-generalizations across large, demographically defined groups of people. It is rare for a generalization to be true for all individuals within such a group.

- **Tactic:** 'The problem with women is that they do not understand what men go through.'

**Response:** 'Surely that cannot be true for all women and I'm not sure it is even true for most women.'

The best neutralization is usually contradiction. The word 'exaggerated' is often useful in situations where there is some truth.

- **Tactic:** 'You have been checking up on me constantly for weeks now and I'm sick of it. Why don't you just leave me alone?'

**Response:** 'It's an exaggeration to say I have been checking your progress constantly. I have checked once or twice a day this week because you seem to have been struggling and I am concerned. The project needs to be finished by the end of the month and I will have to decide how much extra help to give you, if any, to get it done properly in time.'

A 'slippery slope' argument claims that an action is an inevitable step towards something bad and therefore should be resisted. A common form says that a

government policy to restrict a bad behaviour should be resisted because it is a step towards tyranny.

- **Tactic:** 'This proposal is clearly just the start. Governments always want more control and if we don't resist this then we will give the green light to a totalitarian state.'

**Response:** 'This is not the start of a totalitarian state. It is just one proposal to restrict a bad behaviour that has become a problem for a lot of people. The justification for this particular policy seems to be ...'

Some actions really are dangerous first steps in a bad direction. However, these are bad steps in themselves – just small.

E.g. An unreasonable group trying to build its power might push for a small but unfair concession. If it gets that then it will try for another, and another.

Another attack alleges you are a liar because something you said turned out to be false. The main trick here is to claim falsehoods are lies even when there was no intention to deceive and a reasonable effort was made to be accurate.

In politics these allegations are made frequently and there are websites cataloguing hundreds of supposed 'lies' by prominent politicians. Senior politicians are talking on the record for hours a day and often say things that are not true. This means that if their statements are carefully analysed and fact checked it is possible to find a number of these statements. In reality, most will be innocent errors where the speaker:

- Was told something was true by someone they trusted and repeated it.
- Was correctly advised but misunderstood.
- Correctly understood something but then stated it incorrectly in error.
- Used a number that was only approximate.
- Thought something was obvious when experts think it is debateable and at least some disagree.
- Made a claim about an opponent's real intentions that could not be proven from their public statements.
- Stated an intention of theirs firmly to let people know but was then forced to do something else.
- Changed their view on something because of new evidence or ideas. (This is sometimes attacked as a 'U turn' rather than a lie.)

A challenge for senior politicians attacked in this way is to refute the huge number of 'lies' alleged. They need someone to do an analysis of all the claims or a random sample. They should also issue corrections without being forced to.

For ordinary people hit with false claims of lying based on an innocent falsehood it is important to explain that a lie requires an intention to deceive. Then explain what really happened. Make a correction or clarification and a simple apology.

### *Ploys using blame and responsibility*

In many situations where improvement is desirable there are several people or groups who could contribute. That does not mean they must be to blame for past problems or are responsible for future improvements. It also does not mean they are in the best position to act or that their contribution would be important. It just means they could make some positive contribution in future, if they wanted to, and probably more if others also pitch in.

E.g. Imagine a child has been injured in a road accident outside a school at the end of a school day. People who might reduce the danger in future include the children, parents using their cars, other parents, local residents parked nearby, the local authority responsible for traffic calming and other road safety schemes, the designers of road signs and markings, the school administrators and teachers, the caretaker, traffic police and parking enforcement workers, and regional and even national government agencies responsible for funding and other relevant matters.

Tricks involving blame and responsibility involve equating blame, responsibility, and potential to contribute and then doing one of the following:

- Arguing to push as much responsibility and blame as possible onto the people most directly involved. In the school example above this would be the children.
- Arguing to push as much responsibility and blame as possible onto the people with the most power or greatest resources. In the school example above this would be the national government.
- Arguing to push as much responsibility and blame as possible onto someone you just don't like. In the school example this could be just about anyone.

Today people with power often feel they should quickly announce that they will be looking at a nasty incident to see what lessons can be learned. Others less willing to acknowledge their possible role simply keep quiet or jump in to heap blame on those in power.

It is not a trick if the purpose of the discussion is to assign blame or to allocate responsibility, and provided this is done fairly. However, it is a trick if done unfairly or when the purpose of the discussion is to decide how to improve.

To counter these tactics it is important to refocus on finding improvements and block the underlying ploy of equating blame, responsibility, and ability to contribute.

- **Tactic:** 'I blame inconsiderate parking by parents. Have you seen the way they just park anywhere they can in those big four-by-fours? They should be ashamed of themselves. I'm surprised we haven't had more accidents before now.'  
**Response:** 'We're not here to assign blame. What we are here to talk about is what can be done to improve safety by everyone involved, from those in authority right the way through to the children themselves. Let's make a list ...'
- **Tactic:** 'It's just so unfair to blame these kids when there's so little for them to do. Since the government has cut funding for youth groups it is obvious there will be more crime and more drug abuse. The government needs to take responsibility

for its actions.'

**Response:** 'We are trying to identify things that people can do to reduce crime and drug abuse, not assign blame or responsibility. Everyone who can contribute needs to be considered. Let's make a list ...'

### *Assuming disparities are only the result of unfair treatment*

This is often associated with demographic groups (e.g. men compared to women) but it could also be done in an individual case.

- **Tactic:** 'Why am I getting paid less than Bob? You just prefer him because he's always going on about golf, like you.' (This could be a trick if the disgruntled employee is trying to get more despite being a less productive worker.)  
**Response:** 'No. The difference is not the result of unfair treatment. The pay you have each been offered reflects all relevant factors and one of those was that Bob gets things done a lot faster than you.'
- **Tactic:** Based on the percentages alone, 'A larger percentage of Black African 18 year olds goes on to university than of Black Caribbean 18 year olds. It's just another example of rampant racism in this country.'  
**Response:** 'From these figures it's not clear why the difference exists. Racism of some kind might be a factor but there could be other drivers and perhaps racism plays no significant role in this difference. We need more information and to consider other possible drivers.'

### *Selective evidence*

Common examples of selective evidence (also known as 'cherry picking') are:

- Using examples or cases as if they are representative when they are not.
- Interviewing a person about their views and presenting their answers as if they are typical of people generally.
- Citing research papers that support your position and ignoring others.

To neutralize, point out that an overall view is needed. Here are some examples:

- **Tactic:** A heart-breaking case presented as typical, or as common enough to justify new investments or policies.  
**Response:** 'This case is very sad, but it is only one case. To decide what to do we need to understand the overall position. We need to know how many people have had this kind of experience and, of course, how many happy cases there are.'
- **Tactic:** An interviewee's views offered as typical or accepted as a generalization.  
**Response:** 'This interview provides insights into what that person thinks and their personal experiences, but to decide what to do we need to understand the overall position. We need to know how many people have these same views and what other views there are.'

### *False post hoc ergo propter hoc*

This fallacy, with its catchy Latin name, involves claiming that one thing caused another because it occurred shortly before. Sometimes there is causality but not always. Usually there are other clues and sometimes it is obvious that the timing was just coincidence. Neutralize by pointing out that there are other possible explanations.

- **Tactic:** 'As soon as X we started to notice Y, so X needs to be stopped.'
- **Response:** 'Y could very well be unrelated to X, even though you first noticed Y after X. Other possible explanations of Y include ...'

This fallacy is the backbone of anti-vaccination rhetoric. The argument is that someone was vaccinated and then something bad happened to them within the next few days or weeks. This could be just coincidence, though a reaction within 15 minutes of an injection that looks like an allergic reaction is more likely to be a real causal effect. In general, the rate of that bad thing happening needs to be convincingly worse in people who have recently been vaccinated than in otherwise similar people who have not.

### *The straw man ploy*

The straw man tactic involves misrepresenting an opponent's argument so that it looks wrong or nasty. The neutralizing response is to say the representation is wrong. You follow on by restating your position. Here is an example:

- **Tactic:** 'So what you are saying is X.'
- **Response:** 'No, that's not what I'm saying. I am saying that Y and my reasons are ...'

### *False dichotomy*

The false dichotomy tactic involves saying there are only two possibilities when there are more. This is usually done so that one of the two options is obviously more attractive than the other. Neutralize by saying there are other options.

- **Tactic:** A false dichotomy e.g. 'Either we do X or we will have to do Y.'
- **Response:** 'X and Y are not the only options. What I am proposing is Z, and here's how that will work ...'

### *Fallacious appeal to authority*

An appeal to authority is simply pointing out that someone with expertise or official responsibility ('an authority') believes something and that this supports its truth. An appeal to authority is not necessarily a fallacy or trick, but it is if:

- there are other experts who disagree;
- the 'expert' is not really an expert;
- the 'expert' is not objective because he/she is paid to support a particular position (e.g. to defend a company's interests); or

- there is already a strong reason to think the position the expert is supporting is wrong.

Neutralizing a fallacious appeal to authority ideally involves using the relevant reason why authoritative endorsement is not persuasive. Here are some examples:

- **Tactic:** 'Doctor X of the University of Y is an expert on this and he says that there is no evidence of danger from this process.'  
**Response:** 'Other experts say otherwise so, clearly, we have to look at the evidence itself. The main sources of evidence are ...' or 'But there are many more experts who say that Doctor X is wrong, so either we go with the majority of experts or look at the evidence itself. The main sources of evidence are ...'
- **Tactic:** 'The experts agree that X.'  
**Response:** 'Most experts agree but I have looked carefully at the evidence and their reasoning and there are some fundamental problems that anyone can understand. First, ...'

### *Other unreasonable tactics*

This tour of tactics and responses could go on far longer but I hope it is already clear that, regardless of the tactic, it is hard to find a better response than one based on the neutralize-link-continue pattern.

Here are some final examples responding to miscellaneous tactics:

- **Tactic:** A barrage of definition challenges, trying to create the impression that a statement is vague when it is not.  
**Response:** 'The words used were clear enough for our purposes. What was said was that ...'
- **Tactic:** Boring/confusing listeners with complicated stuff so that they think things are too controversial and difficult to resolve.  
**Response:** 'The situation is a lot simpler than that and most of what you said was either not directly relevant or was incorrect. As I explained ...'
- **Tactic:** Moving on without conceding a point.  
**Response:** 'Before we move on to another point, we just established that .... Will you now concede that you were wrong about that?'
- **Tactic:** Saying that an argument has been used before so it is invalid e.g. 'People always say that' and 'that familiar trope'.  
**Response:** 'The point that ... is often said because it is an important observation/argument and still valid.'
- **Tactic:** Falsely saying that an argument has been 'debunked' before.  
**Response:** 'The point has been objected to but not debunked. It is an important observation/argument and still valid.'
- **Tactic:** An argument referring to 'rights' that are not provided by legal texts or are contradicted by other 'rights'.

**Response:** 'Rights can be conflicting and are often limited by legal restrictions in place for good reasons. To understand what's fair here we need to ...'

- **Tactic:** A complicated argument based on morality or rights advanced to get what is probably an unfair amount of money.

**Response:** 'So, overall you think X should give you money. To decide if that would really be fair we need to consider a number of things [you didn't mention]. In particular, ...'

- **Tactic:** Using cognitive relativism ploys. For example, saying that the theory of evolution of species by natural selection is just another opinion.

**Response:** 'The theory of evolution is not just another opinion. It is the explanation of how we and other life forms on earth came to be that fits the observable facts far better than any other, from fossils to DNA analysis, and many other observations besides.'

- **Tactic:** Using moral relativism ploys. For example, saying that sending peace-keeping troops into a troubled country to restore peace and democracy before leaving is as bad as invading it for conquest.

**Response:** 'Peace keeping troops are not the same as invading troops. Those peacekeepers will return home once peace and democracy are restored and it is safe to leave. The army you support intends to conquer new territory and remain in control of it.'

- **Tactic:** Being vague about a proposed course of action and simply describing it as 'fair', 'decent', or 'proper' (e.g. 'Nurses deserve a fair deal.').

**Response:** 'Obviously we want what is fair. We need to determine exactly how much is fair, considering all stakeholders, or how we should arrive at the exact amount.'

## Neutralize confusion and reset the conversation

Sometimes people unintentionally say things that are muddled and perhaps misleading. The contribution might be:

- Incoherent;
- long, rambling, and irrelevant; or
- undermined by a simple misunderstanding (e.g. of what someone said, confusing two similar but different terms, or misunderstanding some technical point).

Confusion can arise when participants in a discussion, for example:

- Have misunderstood key points from briefing documents provided before a meeting.
- React strongly against something somebody did not say.
- Get confused between similar but different points.

- Say something that applies to everyone in a large group when they know it is not true for everyone.
- Talk about one cause of something as if it is the only cause when they know there are other causes.
- Use words and phrases with unclear meaning to others, and even to the speaker.
- Write or say 'is not' when they mean 'is' or vice versa.
- Read or hear 'is not' and think 'is' or vice versa.
- Jump to conclusions when there are other possible explanations.
- Support ideas that are obviously nonsensical.
- Slide into insulting each other instead of sticking to the issues.

Responding to muddled thinking is important and requires a slightly different approach to intentionally bad behaviour. Muddled thinking can slow progress and cause useless digressions. A good response is usually to neutralize any damage done and reset the conversation without being unkind to the perpetrator. Resetting will often involve repeating or elaborating on points that should be the focus of the conversation, restating the type of conversation preferred, or explaining again something that the muddled person did not understand correctly.

Here are some illustrative responses:

- **Problem:** A meaningless contribution.  
**Response:** 'Thank you, but I'm not sure I fully understood that. Would you like to try to summarize your point in simpler language?'
- **Problem:** A contribution that misrepresents or misquotes another participant.  
**Response:** 'In case that has caused any confusion, what X said about Y was actually <correct summary>'
- **Problem:** An irrelevant contribution.  
**Response:** 'Thank you. Let's return to <the relevant topic/question>'
- **Problem:** A misleading and confusing contribution.  
**Response:** 'Let me, at this point, summarize where we are <a summary that corrects the misleading impression>...'
- **Problem:** A long contribution with multiple flaws.  
**Response:** 'There were quite a lot of points there but let me summarize where we have got to and what we're trying to do.'

Sometimes it is hard to tell the difference between someone who is confused and someone who is not confused but sees something others have yet to grasp or is struggling to put a good thought into coherent words. If you are unsure then try a question or two to probe for the logic behind a contribution. If there isn't any then neutralize and reset.