

Oversimplification

1. Stereotypes

We need to understand what exactly it is that makes some arguments based on stereotypes reliable and others not.

Example

Student protests over education cuts

In one article on the student protests over education cuts in 2011 the writer resorts to the use of broad stereotypes to deal with certain groups of people that were involved. He refers to 'The few anarchists and professional agitators in balaclavas' and later he describes the police using another stereotype: 'the face of the Met was ugly, provocative and hostile'.

The questions we need to ask

What we have to ask ourselves is whether these are reliable generalisations about the influence of the individuals, or the majority of them, who made up these groups. If they are not, then they are likely to be statements of bias or prejudice designed to stimulate similar bias and prejudice in the reader. So we need to question the basis of this generalisation. We need to ask was every face of a metropolitan police office 'ugly, provocative and hostile'?; were there none that showed kindness and understanding to

protestors, many of who were very young? Is he talking about the majority of police officers? If so, he should qualify his categorical claim about all police officers, implied in his reference to 'the face of the Met', and let us know how large a majority he thinks this was.

A short cut

The type of stereotype used in this and similar articles gives the writer a short cut to avoid the difficult task of assessing the evidence thoughtfully, crafting a carefully qualified generalisation and then drawing from it inferences that reflect accurately the strength of the evidence. It's much easier to point the reader in the direction you want them to think by using words, like 'anarchist' and 'professional agitator' that conjure up certain preconceived patterns of ideas. The writer doesn't have to justify these ideas: he doesn't have to reveal the evidence and arguments on which his decision to use them is based.

Use that familiar question: 'But what does he mean by X?'

So, what sort of questions do we need to ask? Well, the first is to question the concepts and labels he uses by asking, 'But what does he mean by X? What does he mean by 'anarchist'? He probably doesn't mean what philosophers and political scientists mean by it as someone who is not opposed to all forms of law, but just to that which is not self-imposed. And what does he mean by 'professional agitator'? Someone who is paid to agitate? Again, probably not. He assumes you hold the same set of unexamined assumptions that he does, so that when he uses these terms he can activate them without having to justify their use.

As short cuts stereotypes like these stimulate emotional reactions and attitudes without the need for a carefully reasoned argument. So a writer gets where he wants to go without doing the work that he needs to do if the inference is to be reliable.

Consequently, as readers we often find ourselves opposed to something without having a reason to be: we have been manipulated into a position by a tactic that has sidestepped reason. The irony of this situation is too difficult to ignore: this is exactly what the anarchist is opposed to, because we have been denied our freedom to choose and reason for ourselves.

Unreliable stereotypes – three characteristics

But not all stereotypes are unreliable, only those that amount to bias and prejudice; those that are used as short cuts to avoid reason. They have three fairly obvious characteristics, any one of which is enough to dismiss them:

1. they use false generalisations;
2. or apply generalisations wrongly to an individual;
3. or use concepts that obscure underlying value judgements.

In all three characteristics reason plays no part; instead the writer assumes that you will accept the argument at face value.

Example

In the case above, it is quite likely that not every police officer's face was 'ugly, provocative and hostile', so the generalisation is probably false. The same can be said about the generalisation that those wearing balaclavas were 'anarchists and professional agitators'. Consequently, when this is applied to a particular individual, who was wearing a balaclava at the demonstration, the conclusion that he or she was an anarchist and professional agitator is likely to be false too. And as we've seen, the concepts 'anarchist' and 'professional agitator' are far from clear: they are unexamined concepts that are used to stimulate emotional reactions and attitudes without the need for a carefully reasoned argument.

2. The straw man

When writers use the straw man they oversimplify a case and then dismiss it cheaply to convince us that their arguments are compellingly persuasive.

Example

The Health Secretary

In an article in the *Observer* dated 29th November 2010, the Health Secretary, Andrew Lansley, made the following statement:

The NHS deals with nearly a million patients a day. No one can guarantee that nothing will ever go wrong.

To defend his department against criticisms of their performance he creates a straw man, suggesting that critics are assuming that it is possible to create a department that

never makes any mistakes, which would, of course, be an absurd argument that could be easily dismissed. In fact, his critics were not that foolhardy: they were merely arguing that his department had made mistakes that patients could reasonably expect not to be made, a much more difficult criticism to respond to.

Exercises

Read the following and then see if you can identify the different ways in which the straw man is used.

1. A filmmaker and violent movies

After years of research, forensic psychologists have concluded that violence seen on movies, videos, computer games and television can make aggressive people more prone to violent crime. This suggests that governments should control the levels of violence that are seen, particularly by children. Responding to this prospect one filmmaker argued,

'Does that mean that we mustn't have any villains in any film ever again? We must only have nice people doing nice things, because these already perverted and violent people, who should be in prison anyway, will identify with the villain? So we should only have films about flower-arranging?'

Answer

1. It is clearly an oversimplification of the researchers' argument to say that they claim the only way we can control violence is by not having 'any' villains in 'any' film 'ever' again and that in future we can only have 'nice people doing nice things'.
2. What's more, villains come in many different forms, not all are violent: some are burglars, some petty thieves, some are involved in fraud and so on. So to argue that no films should feature villains is not a consistent inference to draw from the researchers' arguments.
3. Similarly, the filmmaker draws the inference that the group the researchers describe as 'aggressive' are 'perverted and violent people'. In fact the group is much larger than this, including those who have had the misfortune to grow up within families where they witnessed violence, or were the victims of it, and learnt aggression as the only way of coping.
4. And finally, just because a government might want to control the amount of violence, doesn't mean that we're right to infer that all movies thereafter must restrict themselves to flower-arranging.

2. Newspapers

Go through a daily newspaper looking just for examples of the Straw Man fallacy. Concentrate particularly on speeches and statements made by members of the government defending their departments' decisions. As this is a strategy that is used most commonly by those who want to defend their position, you will find it frequently

in speeches by ministers and spokespersons, who are defending their organisation's policies.

The question we need to ask

Arm yourself with a question that should never be far from your lips: is there more to it than this? Ask yourself whether the writer has missed anything or, worse still, deliberately oversimplified the case. Like the other searching question we often use to uncover the preconceptions that lie hidden behind a writer's use of a concept ('But what do you mean by X?'), this one searches for what has been left out. One searches for what's there, but has been left concealed; the other searches for what isn't there, but has been deliberately left out.

The toolkit of searching questions
1. 'But what do you mean by X?' – what has been left concealed? 2. 'Is there more to it than this?' – what has been deliberately left out?

3. Special pleading

Example

Trickle down economics

In the 1980s the supporters of the theory of 'Trickle down economics' – those in government, CEOs and heads of industry – criticised the high wage demands of workers on the grounds that they were over the rate of inflation, while they awarded themselves increases many times higher. Justification was sought by arguing that they were a special case, although, in fact, there appeared to be no relevant differences. They argued that as they spent their increased incomes this would trickle down into the economy and generate jobs, even though workers could argue the same and in even greater numbers.

Having read the explanation of special pleading on page 126 of *How to Write Better Essays*, see if you can identify it in the following exercise.

Exercise

Tattoo artists

Officials in the health department of a large city in the USA decided to close down all tattoo parlours, because they believed that tattooing may be transmitting serum hepatitis directly into the bloodstream through dirty needles and dyes. They claimed to have traced over the previous three years thirty-two cases of hepatitis, including one death, which they believed were due to tattooing.

In their defence one tattoo artist argued, 'I think tattoos do the city good. How many guys have the FBI caught from tattoos? How many people have we helped by covering up scars?'

Answer

Notice how the tattoo artist ignores the particular problems that tattooing might be adding to and concentrates only on its conceivable advantages. The generalisation that he used was that all tattoo parlours contribute their expertise to FBI investigations and help individuals cover up scars. But he ignores the possible dangers involved in transmitting serum hepatitis.

4. The fallacy of false dilemma

In political, religious and moral controversies attempts are often made to convince us that there are only black and white choices available, although most of the decisions we make are not of this type. In the following exercise see if you can identify the false dilemma.

Exercise

Drug arrests

Recent research shows that in Britain black people are six times more likely to be arrested than white people for drug offences and 11 times more likely to be imprisoned. In the US, research shows that black people are three times more likely than white people to be arrested and 10 times more likely to be jailed for drugs offences. Responding to these findings, one academic argued that 'only

decriminalisation of drug use would neuter such apparently discriminatory policies’.

Answer

This suggests that the only alternatives are either to accept the present unsatisfactory situation or to decriminalise drugs. So, ask yourself, are these really the ‘only’ alternatives? Would better training help? Would it help to avoid such discrimination by training staff to use statistics more effectively to create sound generalisations from which reliable stereotypes can be drawn? You can probably think of other things that might be done to tackle the problem. The point is that when writers use the word ‘only’ in almost all cases they are using a disjunctive to strengthen their argument. It oversimplifies the problem in such a way as to force us into accepting an alternative out of fear of leaving the problem as it is.

Exercise

Search newspapers, magazines and the Internet for examples of oversimplification, cases of Stereotyping, The Straw Man, Special Pleading and False Dilemma. Then analyse them to see how they work.