



## Sample Arguments with Fallacies

### What this handout is about

This is an adjunct to the fallacies handout. It presents a sample argument with many fallacies and another, less fallacious, argument.

### Sample argument

*Try to spot the fallacies in the following passage.*

The feminist argument that pornography is harmful has no merit and should not be discussed in college courses. I read "Playboy" magazine, and I don't see how it could be harmful. Feminists might criticize me for looking at porn, but they shouldn't talk; they obviously look at it, too, or they couldn't criticize it. Many important people, including the Presidents, writers, and entertainers who have been interviewed by the magazine and the women who pose in it, apparently agree. Scientific studies so far have not proved that pornography is harmful, so it must not be harmful. Besides, to be harmful, pornography would either have to harm the men who read it or the women who pose in it, and since they both choose these activities, they must not be harmful. Feminists should take a lesson from my parents—they don't like loud music and won't have it in their houses, but they don't go around saying it's harmful to everyone or trying to prevent others from listening to it. Ever since feminists began attacking our popular culture, the moral foundation of our society has been weakened; the divorce rate, for example, continues to rise. If feminists would just cease their hysterical opposition to sex, perhaps relationships in our society would improve. If feminists insist, instead, on banning porn, men will have no freedom and no pleasure left, and large numbers of women will be jobless and will have to work as prostitutes to support themselves. In light of these consequences, feminists shouldn't be surprised if their protests are met with violence. Truly, the feminist argument is baseless.

### A less fallacious argument for roughly the same claim

How might we make a stronger argument for the claim that "the feminist argument that pornography is harmful has no merit"? Let's try to construct an argument that avoids the fallacies above. We'll see what a good argument could look like, even if the evidence needed to make that argument doesn't currently exist.



The feminist argument that pornography is harmful lacks adequate support. First, the feminist argument typically alleges that pornography increases men's willingness to rape women, or at least to think of them only as sex objects. But this argument ignores the fact that the print pornography industry alone earns more money each year than the entire "legitimate" bookselling industry. For that to be true, there must be many, many men and women who read pornography regularly. And yet crime statistics suggest that not many men rape women. Furthermore, most men today believe in women's equality, as a study by Dr. Knowitall and her research group, of the Institute on the Status of Women, demonstrates. Feminists acknowledge that scientific studies have failed to show that porn harms women. If there had been only a few such studies, or if we had reason to believe they were unreliable, we should conclude that nothing has yet been shown about whether porn harms women. But I think that when reliable studies have repeatedly failed to show a relationship, that fact constitutes some evidence that the relationship doesn't exist. So it seems unlikely that porn is harming women in the way the feminist argument alleges.

In the absence of positive evidence from studies, we have to rely on common sense. Can people distinguish between the sometimes-degrading scenarios they see in porn and real life? I believe they can. I think pornography is a lot like television and movies—it presents images that, while they certainly do have some impact on us, we all realize are nothing more than fiction. Young children may have difficulty distinguishing between fantasy and reality, but they are not often exposed to pornography. Men and women who look at porn should know better than to think that it gives a realistic picture of sexual relationships between men and women. If porn cannot be shown to harm women as a class by making them more vulnerable to sexual violence or causing men to think of them as inferior, how else might it be harmful? Feminists have often argued that the porn industry is harmful to the women who work within it—that many of them are abused and exploited. I agree with them that if an industry is mistreating people, it needs to be reformed, and they are doing a public service by pointing out such abuses. But what sort of reform are feminists proposing?

One suggestion I know about has been made by Catharine MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin, who argue that there should be a civil rights statute that allows anyone who has been harmed by porn to seek civil damages from pornographers. My concern about this proposal is that although it will not legally be censorship, since the law would not empower the government to stop anyone from producing material based on the ideas it contains, the civil rights statute will have the same effect as censorship. Pornographers may be so afraid of facing lawsuits that



many of them will stop producing porn—and a situation where people are afraid to put forward certain kinds of writing or pictures because they will face legal consequences seems to violate the spirit, if not the letter, of the first amendment. Porn, like books, may express certain ideas about men, women, and sex, and those ideas may have political ramifications—but just as controversial books are protected, porn should be. It may even do more good than harm by provoking thoughtful discussion and debate about men, women, and sexuality.

**Explanations of the Fallacies:** On the left are the fallacious arguments; the explanation of them is on the right.

**The Most Fallacious-Weak Argument**

<p>The feminist argument that pornography is harmful has no merit and should not be discussed in college courses.</p>	<p>This is the overall conclusion. "Should not be discussed in college courses" = unrelated to the arguments that follow, so this is missing the point.</p>
<p>I read "Playboy" magazine, and I don't see how it could be harmful.</p>	<p>"I read it"=ad populum, "I don't see how"=appeal to ignorance; also, hasty generalization to "Playboy" (as opposed to other porn) and on arguer's own experience</p>
<p>Feminists might criticize me for looking at porn, but they shouldn't talk; they obviously look at it, too, or they couldn't criticize it.</p>	<p>Tu quoque; equivocation on "look at" (reading something to critique it is different from reading it regularly for pleasure).</p>



<p>Many important people, including the Presidents, writers, and entertainers who have been interviewed by the magazine and the women who pose in it, apparently agree.</p>	<p>Ad populum and appeal to authority.</p>
<p>Scientific studies so far have not proved that pornography is harmful, so it must not be harmful.</p>	<p>Appeal to ignorance.</p>
<p>Besides, to be harmful, pornography would either have to harm the men who read it or the women who pose in it, and since they both choose these activities, they must not be harmful.</p>	<p>False dichotomy (women who don't pose could still be harmed); unsupported assumption that people cannot be harmed by activities they have chosen.</p>
<p>Feminists should take a lesson from my parents—they don't like loud music and won't have it in their houses, but they don't go around saying it's harmful to everyone or trying to prevent others from listening to it.</p>	<p>Weak analogy.</p>
<p>Ever since feminists began attacking our popular culture, the moral foundation of our society has been</p>	<p>Post hoc; divorce rate=red herring.</p>



<p>weakened; the divorce rate, for example, continues to rise.</p>	
<p>If feminists would just cease their hysterical opposition to sex, perhaps relationships in our society would improve.</p>	<p>"Opposition to sex"=straw man; "hysterical"=ad hominem.</p>
<p>If feminists insist, instead, on banning porn, men will have no freedom and no pleasure left, and large numbers of women will be jobless and will have to work as prostitutes to support themselves.</p>	<p>Appeal to pity; slippery slope; did anyone actually suggest a ban?</p>
<p>In light of these consequences, feminists shouldn't be surprised if their protests are met with violence. Truly, the feminist argument is baseless.</p>	<p>Ad baculum: A fallacy we didn't discuss, in which the arguer basically says, "If you don't agree with my conclusion, bad things will happen to you." And saying the feminist argument is baseless begs the question—this is not additional evidence, but the exact claim the writer is hoping to establish (with "baseless" in place of "has no merit").</p>



**Fewer Fallacies/Stronger Argument**

<p>The feminist argument that pornography is harmful lacks adequate support.</p>	<p>This conclusion is a little less sweeping than "the argument has no merit," which makes it easier to support. It also avoids getting into other issues like what should be taught in college.</p>
<p>First, the feminist argument typically alleges that pornography increases men's willingness to rape women, or at least to think of them only as sex objects.</p>	<p>This sentence points out exactly which part of the argument is being discussed, which helps keep the reader oriented.</p>
<p>But this argument ignores the fact that the print pornography industry alone earns more money each year than the entire "legitimate" bookselling industry. For that to be true, there must be many, many men and women who read pornography regularly. And yet crime statistics suggest that not many men rape women.</p>	<p>This section of the argument does appeal to "what most people do," but not in the same way as the bandwagon or hasty generalization did. The author doesn't assume that his or her personal experience is necessarily relevant or generalize from a few people he or she knows; instead, he or she refers to "crime statistics."</p>
<p>Furthermore, most men today believe in women's equality, as a study by Dr. Knowitall and her research group,</p>	<p>If Dr. Knowitall is a reliable source, this is a legitimate use of authority, not an appeal to authority or</p>



<p>of the Institute on the Status of Women, demonstrates.</p>	<p>bandwagon.</p>
<p>Feminists acknowledge that scientific studies have failed to show that porn harms women. If there had been only a few such studies, or if we had reason to believe they were unreliable, we should conclude that nothing has yet been shown about whether porn harms women. But I think that when reliable studies have repeatedly failed to show a relationship, that fact constitutes some evidence that the relationship doesn't exist. So it seems unlikely that porn is harming women in the way the feminist argument alleges.</p>	<p>This section of the argument avoids the appeal to ignorance and instead talks directly about what we should do when studies don't show anything conclusively.</p>
<p>In the absence of positive evidence from studies, we have to rely on common sense. Can people distinguish between the sometimes-degrading scenarios they see in porn and real life? I believe they can. I think pornography is a lot like television and movies—it presents images that, while they certainly do have some impact on us, we all realize are nothing more than fiction. Young children may have difficulty distinguishing between fantasy and reality, but they are not often exposed to pornography. Men and</p>	<p>This section of the argument uses a fairly strong analogy between porn and other types of media, like TV and movies. The more relevant traits two things share, the stronger an analogy between them is likely to be.</p>



<p>women who look at porn should know better than to think that it gives a realistic picture of sexual relationships between men and women.</p>	
<p>If porn cannot be shown to harm women as a class by making them more vulnerable to sexual violence or causing men to think of them as inferior, how else might it be harmful?</p>	<p>This sentence assumes there are several possible ways, instead of setting up a false dichotomy.</p>
<p>Feminists have often argued that the porn industry is harmful to the women who work within it—that many of them are abused and exploited. I agree with them that if an industry is mistreating people, it needs to be reformed, and they are doing a public service by pointing out such abuses.</p>	<p>By discussing areas of agreement with opponents, the arguer avoids ad hominem and shows that she is not fanatically devoted to proving that her position is right about everything and that feminists are wrong about everything.</p>
<p>But what sort of reform are feminists proposing?</p>	<p>Again, this question is open and doesn't set up a false dichotomy.</p>
<p>One suggestion I know about has been made by Catharine MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin, who argue that</p>	<p>This is a fairly accurate characterization of the opponent's position, not a straw man; again, the</p>



<p>there should be a civil rights statute that allows anyone who has been harmed by porn to seek civil damages from pornographers.</p>	<p>author attributes ideas to specific people—MacKinnon and Dworkin—rather than making assumptions about what all feminists believe.</p>
<p>My concern about this proposal is that although it will not legally be censorship, since the law would not empower the government to stop anyone from producing material based on the ideas it contains, the civil rights statute will have the same effect as censorship. Pornographers may be so afraid of facing lawsuits that many of them will stop producing porn—and a situation where people are afraid to put forward certain kinds of writing or pictures because they will face legal consequences seems to violate the spirit, if not the letter, of the first amendment.</p>	<p>This might be considered a slippery slope, as the arguer is predicting dire consequences that might or might not follow from something. But notice that the prediction is qualified by "may" (as opposed to "will") and "many" (as opposed to all), and that the consequences predicted are not especially far-fetched.</p>
<p>Porn, like books, may express certain ideas about men, women, and sex, and those ideas may have political ramifications—but just as controversial books are protected, porn should be. It may even do more good than harm by provoking thoughtful discussion and debate about men, women, and sexuality.</p>	<p>A fallacy-free argument isn't necessarily a great one, of course: there are a number of obvious and plausible objections to the argument we've just given. The strength of an argument depends not just on avoiding fallacies, but also on the truth of the premises, the completeness of the author's knowledge, the quality of the evidence used, and so forth.</p>

