

Conversational Terrorism

All of the techniques listed in this document have actually been witnessed, told to us by someone else, or dreamed up. They are described in first person for clarity of motive.

The intent of detailing and naming these insidious tactics is so that the reader may AVOID USING THEM, to quickly recognize if someone else is using them, and for fun. There is much humor in the way people (consciously or unconsciously) conversationally cheat.

It is hoped that exposing these tactics will help muzzle the growing abuse in our conversational landscape. Give copies to both perpetrators and victims (only NOT for profit use).

The examples are overblown in an attempt to be both clear and funny. Use your imagination to think of how you (perish the thought) and others have used these techniques in the past.

They have been grouped by major category, with the best (worst!) saved for last.

First, we have the Ad Hominem Variants where you attack the person as a way to avoid truth, science, or logic which might otherwise prove you wrong. Next are the Sleight of Mind Fallacies, which act as "mental magic" to make sure the unwanted subject disappears. Then, we move on to Delay Tactics, which are subtle means to buy time when put on the spot. Then, the ever popular Question as Opportunity ploys, where any question can be deftly averted. Finally, we have the Cheap Shot Tactics and Irritants, which are basically "below the belt" punches.

Ad Hominem Variants

OVER YOUR HEAD:

"I'd like to respond to that, but taking into account your background, education, and intelligence, I am quite sure that you would not be able to understand."

EVEN YOU:

"My next point will be so cogent that even you will be able to understand it."

"Even you should be able to grasp the next point."

YOU'LL GET OVER IT:

"I used to think that way when I was your age."

"As you mature emotionally (or mentally, or spiritually), you will grow out of your present way of thinking, and you will eventually come around to my point of view."

"You're new here, aren't you?"

WISHFUL THINKING:

Instead of proving a point true or false, this technique tries to imply that the individual's desires have led him/her astray without dealing with the merits of the issue itself. (C.S. Lewis termed this "Bulverism".) Any strong desire can be shown to have tainted a conclusion or clouded objectivity, which casts doubt on the legitimacy of a point. This is very close to the classic ad hominem fallacy: "you say that because you are a man."

"You support capital punishment because of a deep-rooted death wish common among those who have suffered emotional traumas during childhood."

"You oppose capital punishment because of an irrational suppressed death taboo common among those who have suffered emotional trauma during childhood."

"You weren't breast fed as a child, were you?"

Sleight of Mind Fallacies

NIT-PICKING:

Instead of dealing with a comment or question directly, the idea here is to focus on some insignificant detail to evade the issue or buy time to think.

"We need to define just exactly what you mean by _____."

"Your last sentence ended with a preposition. Please restate it properly."

OUT OF CONTEXT:

A twisted version of NIT-PICKING, the technique here is to purposely misunderstand some word, phrase, or analogy and shift the focus to it instead of the subject. This ploy will derail the other person into a defense of the word, phrase, or analogy instead of the case at hand.

"You said 'feel' instead of 'think'. If you are feeling instead of thinking, I won't be able to convince you with reason."

"You said this happened five years before Hitler came to power. Why are you so fascinated with Hitler? Are you anti-Semitic?"

I'M NOT SAYING THIS:

This is a marvelous way to come off as nice while saying things that would otherwise be considered rude.

"Have I ever brought up the \$523.52 you owe me? Never! Have I ever embarrassed you or made you feel bad over it? Have I ever told you how much I need that money? No, I never have."

"I don't care if other people say you're opinionated (or boring or overbearing, or etc.)"

"I don't want to spend a lot of time on this, but (blah, blah, blah...)."

"My dear congregation, I hate to speak of money matters, but (money, money, money, etc.)."

HEAT-SEEKING QUESTION:

The intent here is to throw the other person's competence in doubt while at the same time changing the subject. A question is asked that the other person is not likely to know the answer to, destroying their credibility and confidence. To really rub it in, the questioner can give a full answer to his/her own question proving that him/herself to have superior knowledge of the subject.

"You mentioned the constitution. Can you quote the preamble for us?"

"Do you realize which of the dialectic principles you've just violated?" ["No."]
"I'd be glad to explain them to you, but (branch to OVER YOUR HEAD)."

RIGHT BY ASSOCIATION:

"I have observed that those who disagree with me on the next point tend to be unsophisticated, and those who quickly recognize the validity of the point to be more educated. The point is...."

"Of course there is a lot of debate on this subject, but the best scholars believe..."

CHEAP SHOT:

This technique requires prior knowledge of some embarrassing mistake or painful event in the other person's life. This knowledge can be woven into a comment in a way that agitates the other person without direct reference. A key word or phrase is tossed out like a grenade that embarrasses or humiliates the other person.

"What was it your ex-wife used to say?"

"Didn't we already have this argument just before you went through the de-tox program?"

THE SALESMAN'S CLOSE:

This technique asks an obvious question and, by playing on a sense of guilt, demands a predetermined response driven by common sense or decency. The yes or no response is then implied to mean a *complete agreement* with the asker's point of view.

Family get-together: "Doesn't your family mean anything to you?" ["Well, yes!"] "Then I will see you at 10 am."

Support a political movement: "Do you want communism in America? Is that what you want?"

Join a Health Spa: "Don't you care about your own body?"

BOMBAST:

A rhetorical ploy to give more emotional force to a point or objection than is appropriate. This requires showmanship and involves risk, but when it works it can be quite effective. It is useful to use exaggerated facial expressions and/or pound on any nearby objects to

effectively communicate the overreaction.

"How DARE you question such an obvious point?"

"Honestly! You can't REALLY expect me to believe that?"

THINK VS. FEEL:

A person will likely be off center of the ANALYTICAL/EMOTIVE SPECTRUM (an alternate name for this technique) in any heated exchange. By pointing out which side the other person is on, (either side will do) he/she is obliged to defend his/her temperament instead of the case at hand.

"Your cold, analytical approach to this issue doesn't take into account the human element."

"Your emotional involvement with this issue obscures your ability to see things objectively."

LUNATIC FRINGE:

If a person is making an imaginative or novel point, the approach here is to push the idea to a radical extreme generally agreed to be bad. The extreme can be either real or imagined. The hope here is that the other person will reflexively back off and retreat to a defensive position, thus short-circuiting the progression of the argument.

"So you think we ought to just throw out the whole system, then?"

"How is that different from classic fascism?"

"So you would just like to kill off anyone who disagrees with you, it appears!"

CUT 'EM OFF AT THE PASS:

If you can see where the other person's logic is leading, you can make it very difficult along the way by arguing each minute sub-point and example. If the other person can not get past the first point, how will a case ever be made? Most of the techniques listed can be used to achieve this end.

"I don't think we can go on until we establish the scientific validity of that last statement."

"I don't see any point in discussing this until all the data are in."

DENIAL OF A VALID CONCLUSION:

This is the opposite of the CUT 'EM OFF AT THE PASS technique. Instead of arguing along the way, agree with all of the sub-points but deny the obvious conclusion. This is very frustrating to the other person because it automatically changes the subject to epistemology (how we know what we know). Generally, the other person will attempt another explanation rather than get into a heavy epistemological discussion, and the technique can simply be repeated.

"I don't see how you figure that."

"I agree with everything you said except the conclusion. It doesn't make any sense to me, and I can not accept it. I am trying, but your brain must work much differently than mine."

Delay Tactics

If, when put on the spot to answer a question or point, you come up blank, then delay tactics can buy time to dream up a response. These tactics are risky, because if you are not able to think of anything clever during the time you buy, you will be pinned even further.

DESCRIBE THE ANSWER:

Give descriptive attributes of the eventual answer, then pause as if expecting a response, while thinking of a real answer. When this technique is repeated the other person will appear to be begging you to give an answer.

"I think the answer to your last question will clear up your confusion on this subject. (Long pause) Are you ready?"

"Excellent question, and I think the answer will startle you." (Pause, look thoughtfully as if a response is due while thinking up an answer.)

"I'm glad you asked. Would you like a long or a short answer?"

DESCRIBE THE QUESTION:

Same as above, only here the diversionary shift of focus is on the question.

"This question could only come from the confusion of the _____ mind-set."

"That is an interesting question coming from you. Interesting, interesting, interesting." (Pause, as if admiring the other person.)

"The question asked, is basically _____, _____, _____." (Restate the questions in various ways, pausing for approval between each, while thinking up an answer.)

QUESTION THE QUESTION / COMMENT:

A great lead-in for the technique of WISHFUL THINKING, or a method of delay giving yourself time to think of an answer.

"Why do you ask that?" / "What makes you ask that?"

"What drives you to make such a statement?"

BRAIN SEIZURE:

A complex statement that paralyzes the brain.

"What you inferred is not what you implied."

"Your problem is that you are thinking in a linear versus configurational framework."

"I'm not sure if I fail to disagree with that or not."

WORD SALAD, a.k.a. SESQUIPEDALIANISM:

This is a recipe for sophisticated babbling. Ingredients include: philosophic sounding words and sentence structure, unintelligible Latin terms, banal folk wisdom, jargon, catch phrases, truisms, etc. Sprinkle lightly with a few words that appear to pertain to the subject. This will sound very impressive without really saying anything and will buy time to think of something meaty to say while your lips are flapping. In some circles such machinations can actually be passed off as an *answer*--or a point!

"In view of the federal budget deficit, civil unrest, and international politics, we need to consider that, notwithstanding the mitigating circumstances, this country has got to get back on its feet. Don't you agree?"

REVERSE THE QUESTION:

Echo the question back or ask the other person a similar or difficult question. (This can be

a valid technique if not used merely as a delay tactic.)

"What do you think the answer to your question is?"

"How 'bout if I ask you a similar question?"

START A STORY:

With a sparkle in your eye, start into a long-winded story which presumes to apply to the subject at hand. Continue until the other person calls your bluff, then act insulted and claim that you are not getting equal time or a fair chance to explain your case. Then, thoroughly offended, drop the cover story and start with the real answer (whatever it was you were able to think of while you were babbling).

"This reminds me of the time I was in Cucamonga. Let me tell you, it was hot! (Time to think up real answer during dramatic pauses) And we were in a small hotel when a gas leak started. Well! You can imagine how we...."

OBVIOUS ANSWER:

To give an obvious, over-literal, useless, or pun response to delay with humor.

["What is your first point?"] "My first point is point #1."

[How do you explain the difference between salaries of men and women in this company who are performing the exact same jobs?] "I'm not sure, but I think it has something to do with gender."

Question As Opportunity

A standard response for politicians is to view any question as an opportunity to say whatever they want. The "answer" does not have to have anything to do with the "question" asked. This practice has all but killed the utility of debate and dialog in politics and, unhappily, it is spreading to other areas of life as well. Following are some inconspicuous techniques that allow a deft shift from the question subject to the desired subject.

"THIS OR THAT":

Deny that the issue is limited to the question at hand. Redefine the issue to your favorite

topic.

"It is not a question of (this) or (that), but rather it is an issue of (whatever it is you want to say.)"

["Are you for or against capital punishment?"] "I don't think the issue is being for or against capital punishment. The real issue facing our country is the federal budget deficit. I propose that we.... "

"X IS ONE ISSUE, Y IS ANOTHER":

Acknowledges the issue and quickly changes to a new subject.

"X is certainly one topic that could be discussed, but Y is another..."

"Well, my track record is certainly one issue, but this month's agenda is another. Do you know that in the next five days...."

Cheap Shot Tactics and Irritants

HYPOTHETICAL INSULT:

"Take this example: suppose you were a person who was incredibly stupid but was trying to come off as intelligent. What would the proper response be if you were me?"

"Let's just say that we knew for sure that you were a sexual pervert...."

COMPLIMENTARY INSULT:

"Why, that is a brilliant question coming from you!"

"You're looking less repulsive than usual today."

"Who would have thought you had it in you?"

DISTORTED ACTIVE LISTENING:

Active listening is where you parrot back what the other person is saying in order to draw

them out and to keep them talking. DISTORTED ACTIVE LISTENING parrots back what the other person is saying, but gets it all wrong or makes it sound incredibly stupid. Similar to LUNATIC FRINGE.

"If I hear you correctly, your point is... (get it all wrong)."

"It sounds as if you are saying that torturing children is a good idea...."

NAME IT:

To the feeble-minded, if there is a NAME used as a *label* for IT, then it *must* be wrong, even if it isn't. The NAME, now a "proof" of sorts, can be used as a sledgehammer if IT comes up again.

"The case you just made was first made by Edgar Sullivan in the late 1800s and was quickly disproved. The 'Sullivan Error' inevitably occurs to people when they first start studying the subject."

"Your line of reasoning is called the MacGregor Phenomenon."

"Why, that's Calvinism!"

I KNOW BETTER:

A clever and socially acceptable way of denying what someone has said by claiming to know more about what the other person thinks or feels than they do. Believe it or not, this technique is quite commonplace and effective.

"That's a cruel thing to say, and I know you don't mean it."

"You've made that point well, but ... (1) I know where your heart is; (2) I sense that you're not comfortable with what you're saying; (3) I know what kind of person you are deep down ... and that you cannot continue to hold this position and maintain your integrity."

"Johnny, the reason I can't give you permission to go to the party is because I know that deep in your heart you'd rather spend the time here with me."

SELECTIVE MEMORY:

To bring up a past event and GET IT ALL WRONG, or even to make up a past event. The intent is to get the other person confused, angry, and defensive.

"You never admit defeat. Remember that chess game I beat you in?" (The one

you lost.)

"But last week (or a minute ago) you said the opposite! Make up your mind!"

"Remember last time we had an argument, and you turned out to be wrong and wouldn't admit it? Now we're in the same spot we were last time."

STUDIES HAVE SHOWN:

When all else is lost, refer to a phony study that supports your case. This is a bet that the other person will not call your bluff. Does he/she know for certain the study didn't happen? The usual response is "I have not seen or heard of this study", further discrediting the other person as not doing comprehensive study of available source material.

"Research at UCLA has proven conclusively...."

"I know the idea sounds unorthodox, but a recent study at Harvard has substantiated this view."

REPEAT OFFENDER, a.k.a. SLOGAN RESPONSES:

The repeated use of an assertion, truism, bad joke, or even physical gesture when used to the point of extreme irritation.

"The customer comes first!" ["But what about our profit?"] "The customer comes first! ["But they don't have any money!"] "The customer... (etc)."

["What do you think?"] "It's crazy." (wave arms while stating) ["What is that supposed to mean?"] (wave arms wildly) ["Huh?"] (repeat as necessary)

KNEE JERK:

"I would like to answer your question directly, but considering your past reactions / ability to cope with the truth / emotional instability, I feel that to do so would be a disservice to you at this time." [Other person gets (justifiably) upset.] "See, what did I tell you. You are flying off the handle already!"

LOOK AT YOU:

After using any of the previous ploys, point out any physical manifestations of the other person's irritation as further proof that they are wrong.

"You seem to be sweating a lot. Of course, I would be too if I had to try to

support your flimsy position."

"Why look, your lips are quivering. You have a hard time admitting defeat, don't you?"

SELECTIVE QUOTATION:

Use an actual, fabricated, or hypothetical statement from some universally credible source.

"What would your father say if he could hear you now?"

"As it says in the Bible: 'God helps those who help themselves'."

"If Albert Einstein were here I think he would agree with me. Didn't he once say 'If an idea does not at first seem absurd, it is probably incorrect'?"

FAST ANSWER:

The technique here is to answer so quickly or in such detail that no one could ever doubt the response.

["Do you really think that anyone else agrees with this crazy idea?"] "52.359% of Americans surveyed agreed."

YOU'LL PAY FOR THAT:

If proven wrong or corrected in any way that you do not like, *revenge* is the answer here. This can be accomplished by throwing a fit, glowering at the person with a *death stare*, complete withdrawal or pregnant silence, or some other form of dramatic emotional blackmail as manipulation. The idea is to *train* people not to correct you in the future by making them pay dearly for correcting you now. Also known as the THAT WILL TEACH YOU technique and/or THE ESCALATION PLOY.

"If you're going to be that way about it, then...."

"You don't love me (sob!)."

PRETEND AD HOMINEM:

A specific escalation of YOU'LL PAY FOR THAT; make it seem as if the other person is attacking *you* rather than making a simple point or correction, especially if you suspect that the other party is correct. Rather than staying on the subject, begin to act hurt--as if you have been viciously attacked as a human being--rather than admit you are wrong, or could

do better, etc.

"I can't do anything right..."

"I suppose in your eyes I am just a total failure."

["I think the reason people are honking and gesticulating at you is that the sign says MERGE, not STOP."] "Well, if you think me such a terrible, horrible person...."

LISTEN UP:

Pretend that the reason the other person isn't able to agree with you is that they are not listening, or at least not hard enough.

"If you'd just listen you'd have heard me the first time when I said that...."

"Since you obviously weren't listening when I said this before, I'm forced to repeat myself."

FILIBUSTER:

To take an extraordinary amount of time or go to great technical depth to wear out the other person and get time on your side. The other person is pushed to give up and agree with you rather than endure the torture of hearing you go through another sincere, long-winded answer.

"Since you are a true intellectual, I will have to give you a more comprehensive answer than most... Blah, Blah, Blah... (use WORD SALAD technique).

"Now that I have answered your point, do you have any other concerns?"
(Repeat until the other person collapses or gives in.)

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This document was originally titled "Conversational Terrorism" when written, changed to "Conversational Cheap Shots" after the events of 2001, and now back again.

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