

This article represents the first of an ongoing series where I will discuss common errors and fallacies in people's thinking and arguments. Such fallacies can be found everywhere, from the world of health to the world of politics. It is important to know and recognize such fallacies both in our own thinking as well as the thinking of others. By recognizing the fallacies in our own thinking, we are able to move closer to truth and an evidence-based approach, rather than an approach based on dogma and belief. By recognizing the fallacies of others, we are less likely to fall for false claims, snake-oil products, and quackery.

Knowing the common fallacies can dramatically improve our critical thinking skills. This is very important in the world of weight loss and health, because this world is rife with misinformation. The more we know about common fallacies, the better off we are at sorting out the good information from the bad information.

Let's start with our first common fallacy: the false dichotomy

The False Dichotomy

In matters controversial,

My perception's rather fine.

I always see both points of view,

The one that's wrong, and mine. - Unknown poet

The false dichotomy is where you are presented a situation as having only two choices, when many other choices could be considered. It generally takes the following form:

Either A or B is true. If A is false, then B must be true

The false dichotomy goes by many other names, such as:

- False dilemma
- False choice
- Fallacy of the excluded middle
- Black and white thinking

- Either/or fallacy
- Bifurcation fallacy

Here's an example of a false dichotomy:

You're either with us, or against us!

This is a false dichotomy because there are other choices that are not being presented. For example, maybe you don't fall under either category and are neutral. Or maybe you're "with us" on certain issues but "against us" on other issues.

Here are other examples of false dichotomies. Try to think about the other choices that are not being presented:

If you're not a conservative, then you must be a liberal

America...love it or leave it!

It's owls versus jobs, the environment or the economy

Do you want the red car or the blue one?

We must deal with crime on the streets before improving schools

Either I keep smoking, or I'll get fat. I don't want to get fat, so I better keep smoking.

Either you use Speed Stick deodorant or you'll stink to high heaven. You don't want to stink, so you better use Speed Stick

Either the eyewitness saw an alien, or he's a liar

If you're not part of the solution, you're part of the problem

Better dead than red

Your grades show you just aren't trying. Either study more, or drop out of school!

Either scientists can explain the strange objects in the sky over Gulf Breeze, Florida, or these objects are piloted from outer space

We find false dichotomies in the world of health and nutrition as well:

This food is either good for me, or it's bad for me. So tell me which it is!

I would rather that I and most in society would die at 75 to 85 and have enjoyed a relatively happy life, then to see folks live until 100 as dried up, unpleasant prunes that are a complete chore to be around.

If you don't eat this diet, you will have an unhealthy life

False dichotomies can present themselves in other ways. For example, it may not be an instance where two choices are presented and there's many more. It could be a situation where there's two choices presented, but there's only one. For example, in [my critique of chapter 14 of Good Calories, Bad Calories](#), I gave an example of how the author presented survey data on food intake of people in the U.S. He claimed that either increased carbohydrate intake or the increased calorie intake was responsible for weight gain among U.S. citizens. However, this is a false dichotomy because the increased carbohydrate intake WAS the increase calorie intake (you can't separate the two; they aren't independent). In fact, when you look at the title of the book, even that is a false dichotomy!

A false dichotomy doesn't have to be a dichotomy. It could be a trichotomy, a "quad-chotomy", etc. Whenever you present someone with a limited number of choices, when in reality there are more choices, you are committing this fallacy. For example, one individual recently gave me a menu of 5 choices to help reduce someone's insulin resistance. He then told me that I could only pick one of the choices. However, this individual had presented me with a "false quin-chotomy", because I'm not limited to just one choice in real life. Also, there are many other choices other than just the 5 that he presented to me.

Only One Ending

Remember, when someone presents you with a limited number of choices, when there are other choices as well, then that person is presenting a false dichotomy or variation of it. Hopefully you now have a better understanding of this fallacy, and that you can recognize it when others present it, or when you may present it yourself.

Stay tuned for future articles where I will discuss other common fallacies.