

No other fallacy is probably more prevalent in the health industry than the straw man. The straw man is where you misrepresent an opponent's position. You "set up a strawman" because you create a position that is easy to refute, then attribute that position to your opponent. You are essentially substituting a hard target for an easy one. It is called a straw man because it is very easy to tear down a straw man; however, it is a fallacy because you have not refuted your opponent's true position.

Straw Man Examples

Straw men are prevalent everywhere. Here is one example of a strawman:

Person A: "I don't think children should play on busy streets."

Person B: "I think it would be foolish to lock up children all day."

Person B's statement is a straw man, because person A never said that children should be locked up all day. Person A only said that children should not play on busy streets. You do not need to be locked up all day to avoid playing on busy streets.

Here is another example:

Person A: "We should legalize marijuana."

Person B: "No! Any society with unrestricted access to drugs loses its work ethic."

Person B's statement is a straw man because Person A is not advocating unrestricted access to drugs. Person A only advocates legalization of marijuana. Not only does marijuana not represent all drugs, but legalization does not mean unrestricted access either.

Here is another example:

Professor Jones: "The University just cut our yearly budget by \$10,000."

Professor Smith: "What are we going to do?"

Professor Brown: "I think we should eliminate one of the teaching assistant positions. That would take care of it."

Professor Jones: "We could reduce our scheduled raises instead."

Professor Brown: "I can't understand why you want to bleed us dry like that, Jones."

Professor Brown's statement is a straw man because Professor Jones is not advocating "bleeding them dry." Reducing a scheduled raise is certainly not bleeding someone dry!

Here is an example of two straw men:

Jill: "We should clean out the closets. They are getting a bit messy."

Bill: "Why, we just went through those closets last year. Do we have to clean them out every day?"

Jill: "I never said anything about cleaning them out every day. You just want to keep all your junk forever, which is ridiculous."

Bill's statement is a straw man because Jill never said anything about cleaning the closets every day. But Jill responded with her own straw man by stating that Bill wanted to keep his junk forever, which Bill did not state.

Straw Men in Politics

Politics are full of straw men. Here is one example:

"Senator Jones says that we should not fund the attack submarine program. I disagree entirely. I can't understand why he wants to leave us defenseless like that."

Not wanting to fund an attack submarine program does not mean someone wants to leave a country defenseless. I have seen numerous variations of the above example

in the political arena.

Straw Men in Weight Loss and Nutrition

Here is one example of a straw man in terms of nutrition:

Person A: "The Atkins Diet will decrease your cholesterol and help you lose weight."

Person B: "A diet of nothing but cheeseburgers, pork chops, butter, and bacon will do nothing but clog your arteries. I don't think lard is part of a healthy diet."

Person B's statement is a straw man because an Atkins diet does not necessarily mean a diet of "nothing but cheeseburgers, pork chops, butter, and bacon." It also doesn't mean that you will eat nothing but lard.

Here is another example from the opposite end of the spectrum:

Person A: "Low fat diets will decrease your cholesterol and help you lose weight."

Person B: "A diet of nothing but breads, cereals, and crackers will make you hungry and gain weight."

Person B's statement is a straw man because a low fat diet does not mean a diet of "nothing but breads, cereals, and crackers."

I've encountered numerous straw men on the internet when it comes to people discussing my own positions and writing. In fact, just recently, some individuals at a site called the Harcombe Diet Club [were discussing some of my articles in their forum](#). The author and owner of the site, as well as some of her followers, proceeded to construct numerous straw men. [In this post](#), I proceeded to point out the numerous straw men that the individual Zoe was constructing...and then she proceeded to construct more strawmen! There are way too many to describe here, but here are a few that are quite interesting. [In this post](#), she states,

2) I followed the link on your site to the George Bray critique of GCBC and Bray

opened with the quote that Short in 1727 and Wadd in 1810 had each never seen obesity like they did at that time. I am sure that they hadn't. But what they would have observed around them at this time (indeed up to the 1960's) would have been a trace of obesity in the overall population. Although maybe unprecedented for them, this is incomparable with what Short would observe if he walked around America today. 33% obese and some 4 times the size of baby elephants. I simply don't buy that the cause of this explosion and epidemic is under reporting!

Her statement is a strawman because no one is claiming that the explosion of obesity is caused by underreporting. The fact is that underreporting correlates with obesity...it doesn't cause it.

Here is another gem from the same post:

"are more open minded to new ideas and we know, all of us from experience, that calorie counting does not produce sustained weight loss."

This was another strawman because no one claims that calorie counting produces sustained weight loss. Calorie counting is an awareness tool and nothing more. It doesn't cause weight loss...it is only a tool to be aware of how much someone is eating. People looking to gain weight (like bodybuilders) also use calorie counting. And, in fact, calorie counting improves people's chances of successful weight loss because of the improved awareness; this has been repeatedly demonstrated in research studies [such as this one](#). It is a fact that people who self monitor consistently through meal tracking and/or regular weighing have greater probabilities of long term success.

Zoe then finished off with this straw man:

I'm shocked and disappointed that someone who has studied nutrition would rather profit from selling someone a product with 20 manufactured ingredients than advise them to eat meat, fish, eggs, dairy, vegetables, salads, fruit and whole grains.

She made this statement when I linked to [the obesity treatment program for which I used to work](#). This was a strawman in many ways. First, I never profited off of any of the products sold by the program; I was a salaried employee and my salary was the same whether we sold 0 products or 1000 products. Second, it was a strawman because she had no idea what our program entailed. Our program was primarily based on the real foods she talks about in that sentence. The products were only meant as an occasional supplement for our busy clients, particularly that many were working 60-80 hours per week. We never recommended any of the products over real food; in fact, it was quite the opposite. The third way it was a strawman is in lumping all processed foods in the same category. A protein shake is quite a bit different from a cookie.

Overall, that particular thread is a gold mine of examples of the straw man. There are many more there and other places...way too many to be discussed here.

The Straw Man...If He Only Had a Brain

The straw man is extremely prevalent. Sometimes it's obvious...sometimes it can be very subtle. You should always be diligent and aware of when you or someone else is portraying an argument that is easy to beat up but was never actually made.