

Rhetorical Devices – Scare Tactics

Scare tactic: a strategy using fear to influence the public's reaction; coercing a favorable response by preying upon the audience's fears.

Scare tactics are not direct threats, but are intimidated conclusions. Instead of threatening a consequence onto a person, scare tactics highlight the possible negative outcomes to the extreme, while merely suggesting connectedness. The audience is supposed to use its own logic to draw the obvious negative conclusions. This is dangerous, for people often believe their own faulty logic because we feel that we can trust our own decisions (simply because they belong to us). If we base these conclusions on fear, however, then we have committed a logical fallacy.

Scare tactics work often in real life, perhaps because some people can more easily imagine the bloody details of a dire consequence than to rationalize the remoteness of its possible occurrence. This may explain why many people fear flying in light of statistical evidence that proves it to be the safest form of vehicular transportation. Such tactics can also be unfairly used to magnify existing (and sometimes legitimate) fears into panic or prejudice. The possibility of nuclear war in the 1950s encouraged millions of Americans to spend over \$20,000 of today's money on a back yard bomb shelter so their family could "survive" a nuclear war (and the 100-year nuclear winter that would follow). That money could have been used to help the family immediately (college tuition, heart bypass surgery, etc.).

EXAMPLE 1

A rabid liberal sympathizer shouts: "If this man gets elected, he'll change your welfare benefits. Don't let those Washington bureaucrats tinker with your food stamps!"

Usually, scare tactics do incorporate any real evidence or key details that might place the attack in a more balanced focus. How exactly does the candidate plan to alter these welfare benefits? Perhaps he actually plans on increasing them, even though his opponent's propaganda might suggest otherwise. Without the details to substantiate this argument, the audience's fear fills the void, opening the door to prejudice or rash thinking.

Thousands of American politicians have been elected because they effectively (and unfairly) convinced their constituents that their opponents should be feared (not just defeated).

EXAMPLE 2

Anti-drug TV commercial: "This is your brain. These are drugs. This is your brain on drugs."

This classic TV ad showed an egg frying in a blackened pan, representing one's brain being "fried." This campaign was only marginally successful, yet it ran for years on youth-oriented programming, such as MTV. The appeal is strictly emotional, suggesting that trying any drug will sear your brain juices to the point of evaporation. The ad never offers a direct, logical reason to abstain from drug use, nor clarifies the real effects of various drugs. Will I "fry" if I take aspirin or my doctor's prescription too? The terms "drug" and "fried" are too vague to be educational, but the image produces an emotional reaction, so it works (a little). This campaign was powerful, and its quest noble, but the argument presented in this commercial was clearly invalid. This example also qualifies as a false analogy, since the objects being compared and associated are not analogous – my brain is not a chicken egg, and no drug will heat it past the boiling point.

Your assignment: Find an example from your novel when a character is clearly using scare tactics to try to influence another character or characters. Copy the example on notebook paper, then CLEARLY explain why this is an example of scare tactic. Use the information above to help you.