



American Expression E1225 Red herring

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A "red herring" is a rhetorical device or logical fallacy that is often used in communication, literature, politics, and arguments. It is a misleading or distracting clue or piece of information that is intentionally introduced to divert attention from the real issue or to lead people down a false or irrelevant path. The term "red herring" originates from the practice of using strong-smelling, smoked herring fish to train hunting dogs to follow a scent trail. In this context, the red herring was a decoy scent used to throw off the dogs.

In debates and arguments, a red herring is employed when one party introduces an unrelated or tangential point to shift the focus away from the main topic or issue under discussion. The goal is often to confuse or mislead the audience and avoid addressing the central argument directly. By introducing a red herring, the person using this tactic hopes to win the debate by deflecting attention or creating confusion rather than by presenting a strong counterargument.

For example, in a political debate about healthcare reform, if one candidate starts discussing an unrelated topic like national security, they may be using a red herring to distract from the primary issue of healthcare policy. In this case, the red herring serves as a diversionary tactic to avoid addressing the opponent's arguments or to appeal to emotions and fears unrelated to the healthcare topic.

In literature and storytelling, red herrings are often employed to create suspense or mislead the audience. Mystery novels frequently use red herrings by introducing false clues or suspicious characters to divert readers' attention from the true identity of the culprit. These deliberate distractions keep the audience engaged and guessing until the story's climax, where the real solution is revealed.

In everyday conversations, red herrings can be unintentional diversions caused by shifting from one topic to another without a clear connection or by introducing irrelevant details. In such cases, the conversation may lose focus and effectiveness as participants get sidetracked by unrelated information.

Detecting a red herring in an argument or discussion requires critical thinking and careful analysis. It's essential to recognize when a point or piece of information is introduced to distract from the primary issue and to steer the conversation back to the main topic.

Addressing red herrings effectively involves staying focused on the central point of contention and avoiding the temptation to follow the diversion. One can calmly point out that the introduced topic is irrelevant to the current discussion and request that the conversation return to the main issue.

In conclusion, a red herring is a deceptive or distracting tactic used in communication, debates, literature, and arguments to divert attention from the central topic or issue. It is a deliberate attempt to mislead or confuse by introducing unrelated information or arguments. Recognizing and addressing red herrings is crucial for maintaining clear and constructive communication and for ensuring that discussions stay focused on the relevant topics at hand.

Questions for Discussion

1. Can you provide examples from real-life situations, such as politics or advertising, where the use of a red herring successfully diverted attention from the main issue or message? What were the consequences?
2. In literature and storytelling, how do authors effectively use red herrings to create suspense and engage readers or viewers? Can you share a memorable example from a book, movie, or TV show?
3. How can individuals recognize when a red herring is being used in an argument or debate, and what strategies can be employed to bring the discussion back to the central issue or topic?
4. Are there instances where the use of a red herring is justified or appropriate in communication or persuasion? If so, when and why might it be acceptable to employ this tactic?
5. In what ways can critical thinking skills be enhanced to better identify and respond to red herrings in everyday conversations and debates, ultimately leading to more effective and focused discussions?