



American Expression E2771 Red herring

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A red herring is something that distracts attention from the real issue, question, or subject being considered. It can be a misleading argument, irrelevant piece of information, false clue, or deliberate diversion. When someone introduces a red herring into a discussion, people may begin focusing on something that appears important but actually has little connection with the central matter. The expression is widely used in everyday conversation, politics, debates, journalism, literature, and detective stories.

The phrase has an interesting history involving strong smells and hunting traditions. A herring is a type of fish, and when herring is smoked or cured, it can develop a reddish color and powerful odor. A popular explanation claims that such fish were dragged across trails to confuse hunting dogs by creating a competing scent. However, historians have questioned whether this was ever a widespread hunting practice. The modern figurative expression became associated with misleading trails and distractions.

In arguments, a red herring occurs when someone responds to an issue by introducing another topic that does not actually answer the original point. Imagine employees asking why their salaries have been delayed, and a manager responds by describing how hard the company has worked to improve its office decorations. The decorations may be worth discussing, but they do not explain the delayed salaries. Attention has been redirected away from the relevant question.

Red herrings are particularly effective because they are not always obviously irrelevant. A distraction may be emotionally powerful, interesting, controversial, or partly connected to the original subject. This makes people more likely to follow it. In political debates, for example, a speaker may avoid answering criticism about one policy by attacking an opponent over an unrelated matter. The audience can become absorbed in the new controversy and forget the original question entirely.

Writers frequently use red herrings as storytelling devices, especially in mysteries, thrillers, and crime fiction. An author may present a suspicious character, mysterious object, or apparently important event that encourages readers to develop the wrong theory. Later, the real explanation is revealed, and readers discover that the earlier clue deliberately led them in another direction. Effective red herrings create suspense without making the eventual solution feel unfair or completely unpredictable.

Recognizing red herrings requires careful attention to relevance. When encountering a persuasive statement, people can ask whether it actually addresses the original claim, provides evidence about the central issue, or merely introduces a different concern. Returning repeatedly to the main question is often the simplest defense. Red herrings may be intentional attempts at manipulation, but they can also occur accidentally when conversations wander naturally from one interesting subject to another.

In conclusion, a red herring is a distraction that leads attention away from what truly matters. It may appear as an irrelevant argument, misleading clue, emotional diversion, or unnecessary piece of information. Understanding the expression is useful because distractions occur constantly in conversations, advertising, media, politics, workplaces, and personal disagreements. By separating relevant evidence from attractive but unrelated information, people can think more critically, communicate more clearly, and avoid being misled. In fiction, red herrings make mysteries entertaining; in real life, recognizing them helps people remain focused on the actual issue and reach better conclusions.

Questions for Discussion

1. What is a red herring, and how can it distract people from the main issue?
2. Why are red herrings commonly used in mystery novels, movies, and detective stories?
3. How can a red herring be used during an argument or political debate?
4. What can people do to recognize and avoid being misled by red herrings?
5. Have you ever encountered a red herring in a conversation, advertisement, news story, or movie?