Fans of the 1960s sitcom *The Andy Griffith Show* may recall the episode in which Deputy Barney Fife spends his life savings, $300, on the purchase of a new car. Lured by an ad in the local paper for a Ford Sedan owned by a widow who drove it “only to church on Sundays and once a year to Aunt Martha’s on Thanksgiving,” Barney goes to the widow’s home, confident of his ability to make a shrewd deal.

There, the “sweet old widow” complains to Barney, “I do owe the Mount Pilot Funeral Parlor ten dollars . . . and the lawyer. [My late husband] did leave a few debts.” Between the sight of the gleaming car and the widow’s tale of woe, the last shreds of Barney’s resistance dissolve, and he ends up not only buying the car, but also paying more than her asking price. The next day, Barney discovers that the widow has conned him into buying a lemon. If Barney had only learned to recognize logical fallacies and to understand their capacity to sway people’s thoughts and behavior, he might still have his money.

1. **Argument to the People (Appealing to Stirring Symbols)** involves using a visual symbol (the American flag, pictures of babies, “Support the Troops” bumper sticker, etc.) of something that much of the public finds hard to reject but that has little relevance to the argument. The widow dressing in a sweet, old-fashioned dress and affecting a frail walk exemplifies this fallacy. Their purpose is to elicit Barney’s sympathy for the widow and make him feel too guilty to pass on the deal or to haggle over the price. The technique succeeds with Barney because he fails to notice that the symbols that have brought out his sympathy have nothing to do with the car’s merits.

2. **Appeal to Pity (Ad misericordiam)** is a verbal version of the above. When the widow enumerates her debts to Barney, she appeals to his pity. Like Arguments to the People, Appeals to Pity are fallacious if they are irrelevant to the argument in question; pity for the widow should not be a reason for Barney to buy the car. In some cases—for example, when soliciting money for poor people or for the Humane Society—appeals to pity may be legitimately used.

Though the widow did not use the following logical fallacies, advertisers, salespeople, politicians, and others might use them to manipulate you.

1. Years ago, a commercial for Bufferin Aspirin used **Erroneous Appeal to Authority** by featuring people on the street lining up to ask Angela Lansbury, a popular actress at the time with no medical authority whatsoever, questions about the pain reliever.

2. **Ad Hominem** (“to the person”) involves a personal attack on the character of the opponent rather than on the argument itself. Criticizing a restaurant because the chef is “too skinny,” rather than focusing on the
merits of the restaurant’s food, service, atmosphere, or other relevant aspect is an ad hominem attack. However, an ad hominem argument that is relevant to the issue (“Rinalda Gooch will not make a good President because she faints every time she tries to make a speech”) is not a logical fallacy.

3. **Shifting the Issue (aka Red Herring)** refers to the arguer’s changing the subject to avoid dealing with an unpleasant aspect of the argument: When a reporter questioned candidate Stone about her past marijuana use, she responded, “Why haven’t you asked my opponent about his drinking?”

4. **Hasty Generalization** means to argue on the assumption that an entire group shares the same traits as one or two examples of that group: “Women should not be considered for high political office because they’re too emotional to make thoughtful decisions.”

5. **Appeal to Popularity – Bandwagon** is an argument based on the premise that an idea or product has merit just because it is popular: “All the cool kids are wearing Stinko sneakers this season,” the saleswoman told the boy. “You don’t want to be left out, do you?”

6. **Begging the Question** involves “supporting” an argument by stating the argument in different words. “We need to bomb evildoers because they are guilty of horrendous acts,” for example, basically restates the claim (evildoers are people who do evil) instead of stating a reason why bombing the “evildoers” is a good thing to do.

7. An argument that uses **Post Hoc, Ergo Propter Hoc** (“after this, therefore because of this”) illogically suggests that because one event followed another, the first event caused the second to occur: “The fact that students cut their hair over the weekend and their test scores were higher on Monday shows that shorter hair leads to good grades.”

8. **False Dilemma or Dichotomy -- Either/Or** argument attempts to sway opinion by making it seem as if the only alternative to a proposed argument is one that is obviously unacceptable. For example, “We must fight the enemy in their land so they don’t follow us to ours” suggests – but does not attempt to show -- that one country’s aggression is the only way to decrease another country’s aggression.

9. **The Slippery Slope** argument attempts to dissuade people from taking or allowing a specific action because it might cause a particular condition to spiral out of control – no matter how far-fetched: “Legalizing same-sex marriage could lead to legalizing marriage between people and their pets!”

While avoiding logical fallacies is next to impossible, you can learn to recognize them – and avoid Barney’s fate!