

The Garden of Episteme: Promotional Materials

William H. Tolson

Full Sail University

In a country where a sitting congressman told a crowd that evolution and the Big Bang are “lies straight from the pit of hell,” where the chairman of a Senate environmental panel brought a snowball into the chamber as evidence that climate change is a hoax, where almost one in three citizens can’t name the vice president, it is beyond dispute that critical thinking has been abandoned as a cultural value. Our failure as a society to connect the dots, to see that such anti-intellectualism comes with a huge price, could eventually be our downfall.

-David Niose, *Psychology Today*

One of the world’s greatest, but largely unrecognized crises may be the rampant spread of anti-intellectualism in the “information age.” Especially in the United States. Luckily, the issue continues to draw more and more support from educational foundations and scientific organizations that have recognized how corrosive the problem is becoming to our society as a whole. And luckily, the solution on an individual scale is simple: basic critical thinking skills. The real difficulty is getting the up-and-coming generations, who have been brought up with the example of loud but uninformed opinions trumping quiet but pragmatic ones, to pay any mind to clear thought patterns. So I wrote the animated short *The Garden of Episteme* out of the possibility of helping one of those organizations bridge that gap a bit more.

The Garden of Episteme should help pique an interest in critical thought in pre-teens and teens by illustrating rhetoric and critical thinking as “real” forms of magic. Just from watching the film, the “bad guys” using manipulative rhetoric should stand out more to them, as should the “good guys” using critical thinking skills to dispel those manipulations. But there are many opportunities for great promotional and educational materials to powerfully compliment those aspects of the story.

The most obvious to me would be a “listicle” to help the ideas in the film spread through social media, because that’s most likely to reach the target audience in a form that they’re familiar with (encl 1). Even those who haven’t seen the film might be intrigued to skim a listicle that’s shared about a slightly different topic than the same old ones they’ve already seen several times that day. And it could also be easily converted to a buzz-feed style click-through, with engaging pictures of the characters and settings that apply to the list, helping their retention and increasing share-ability.

I also think it would be important for the sponsor of the film to provide supplemental materials to help parents and teachers explain critical thinking at a slightly deeper level than just the film alone can approach (encl 2). The brief cognitive opening in teens provided by the entertainment value of the film would be a shame to waste because of a lack of information or preparation. And as many critical thought, skepticism, and science activism groups have been propositioning various school boards to consider establishing critical thinking courses, having some examples of practical ways it could be instructed could be very valuable.

Ideally, the film would catch on to the point where it had a significant number of actual fans. At that point, in-depth description of the “magic” would be a huge boon for spreading honest rhetoric and critical thinking concepts. For example, a poster explaining the different enchantments could teach a great deal about the difference between logical fallacies and sound arguments. One side could have Sophie’s spells, logical fallacies, and the other side could have Kairos and her team’s ways of

exorcizing those spells from each other. It may be idealistic to imagine that ever catching on, but it would be huge boon for American intellectual honesty if pre-teens were memorizing spells that taught them how to think clearly. Instead of ones that are just made-up gibberish for whatever the en vogue fantasy genre of the day is.

At the very least though, listicles and teaching materials would help the film meet its primary goal of being an allegory that aids in critical thinking. And that's all most of the foundations who might fund it would expect, through their own site. So things like the listicle to draw attention to that site, and the teaching materials to make it more educationally well-rounded, would be the first priorities in promotional materials supporting the film.

Works Cited

Niose, D. (2015, June 23). *Anti-intellecualism is Killing America*. Retrieved from Psychology Today: <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/our-humanity-naturally/201506/anti-intellectualism-is-killing-america>

5 EASY WAYS TO DEFEAT THE “MADAME SOPHIES” IN YOUR LIFE

Manipulative arguments permeate every aspect of our lives. It may be the “information age,” but unfortunately this age has not improved the quality of that information all that much... only the quantity, exponentially. And for every new reliable source we gain access to, it seems ten new sketchy, politically-charged “sources” pop up. So how do we decide which claims to trust? That becomes a tougher question every day, with ever more “reasons” to sort through. But having a good grasp on which ones we can’t trust, because they aren’t even supported by any valid reasoning at all, is a step in the right direction. One that might at least help keep us from being a part of the problem, and spreading bad reasons to think something is true. And that’s the value of contemplating the meaning of the allegorical enchantments in *The Garden of Episteme* with respect to the real rhetorical attacks we come under every day.

1. **False Comparisons**

A favorite of the politically-loaded meme... comparing “apples and oranges.” Most of us can naturally point out the most obnoxious ones, but you might be surprised how easily suggestive but slightly off-base comparisons can slowly change our opinions without us even realizing it. Don’t let yourself be manipulated, keep them out of your *Garden*!

2. **Wrong Number of Options**

“You’re either with us, or you’re a Nazi.” Two-party political systems seem to even make this worse... but there are so many choices in life that there are myriads of options beyond the two most commonly posed. And don’t forget to embrace the power of AND; often the most important choices we’re faced with aren’t even exclusive of each other.

3. **Logical Disconnect**

All teenagers have Facebook pages, and you have a page, so you must be a teenager. That’s a *formal* fallacy called “affirming the consequent.” And there are countless other ones; mostly *informal* in that they aren’t quite as clear-cut. But to any of them, the way to catch them is to honestly ask yourself *does that evidence actually lead logically to that conclusion?*

4. **Unrelated Distraction**

Well, to the issue of Climate Change, I should point out that my opponent says he only wears white, but I saw him in black! *Red Herrings*, like this “appeal to hypocrisy,” are often lumped in with informal fallacies. But it can be said that they’re more specific: they can be caught just by asking yourself *does that actually have anything to do with this, or is it just a distraction?*

5. **“Proof” that isn’t actually proof**

Studies by the Jedi Fan Club show that *The Force* is real, so it must be possible to lift things telekinetically. Sound logical? Well, technically it is... but the underlying proof is terrible. So any extension of that “proof” is also useless, no matter how logically sound. This one can be tricky. But is it honestly verifiable? Is it falsifiable, so we can test it? What are the incentives of those who consider it proof? Are their methods based in objectivity? Be careful, because as you can see, those are all ripe for slipping back into a fresh pile of fallacies.

Of course, you could spend hours memorizing thousands of different titles and characteristics of specific types of fallacious arguments, but that often isn’t good for much other than being a smart-ass on the internet. But if you remember all five of these steps, you’ll know what to say when Kairos needs you to enchant her arrow so she can break one of Madame Sophie’s spells, in real life.