

'It Begs the Question'—How to Actually Use That Phrase

"It begs the question..."

Most people use this phrase to mean the equivalent of "It raises the question" or "It invites the question". For instance, in a tee-up to their "news" story last month that Ivanka Trump still calls our president "Daddy", Britain's *Telegraph* wrote, "It begs the question—how old is too old to call your father Daddy?"

Like most people, I often find myself tempted to use "begs the question" in this sense, probably because it sounds much more academic than "raises the question".

But it's wrong—at least according to the original meaning of the phrase.

"Begging the question" is actually a logical fallacy, a loose translation of the Latin term *petitio principii*. A person begs the question when he assumes what's supposed to be his conclusion in his premise. It's also commonly known as "circular reasoning".

An obvious, and perhaps the most frequently cited example of begging the question, is the following argument: "God exists because the Bible says so, and the Bible is true because it comes from God." In this case the conclusion needing to be proved—that God exists—is already assumed in the premise that establishes the Bible's authority. It's easier to see how ridiculous the argument is when you put it in syllogistic form:

Premise 1: Everything that the Bible claims is true, because the Bible comes from God (who exists).

Premise 2: The Bible says that God exists.

Conclusion: Therefore, God exists.

Some years back, when Lindsay Lohan was in the news, a *New York Times* editor helped distinguish between correct and incorrect uses of “begs the question” [with the following example](#):

Imagine that we’re discussing Lindsay Lohan.

YOU: I can’t understand why the news media give so much coverage to Lindsay Lohan. It’s ridiculous. She’s not that important or newsworthy.

ME: What? Of course she’s important and newsworthy! Lindsay Lohan is a big deal. Why, just look at the newsstand. People magazine, The Post, you name it. She’s everywhere.

YOU: That begs the question.

ME: Huh?

*Your use of the phrase is **correct**. In arguing that Lindsay is important enough to merit heavy news coverage, I cite as evidence the fact that she gets heavy news coverage. It’s a circular argument that **begs the question**.*

...

But imagine this conversation.

ME: I can’t understand why all the news media give so much coverage to Lindsay Lohan. It’s ridiculous.

YOU: I’m sure they do it just to sell papers and magazines.

ME: Yeah – which begs the question, why do people want to read about her?

YOU: That’s not begging the question. That’s simply raising

the question.

Now, there are some who will argue that language is constantly evolving, and that the changed meaning of “begs the question” is an example of a harmless evolution.

But I’m not so sure how harmless it has been. I worry that widespread ignorance of the original meaning is but another symptom of the decline of logic education in schools. I also worry that it reduces people’s awareness of the real examples of question-begging that we see every day in the news and politics.

For those who are still interested in maintaining a correct usage of “begs the question”, I will close with [the handy piece of advice](#) given by *Weekly Standard* writer Joseph Bottum: “If what follows ‘begs the question’ is an actual question, you’re probably misusing the phrase ‘begs the question.’”