



Using Evidence

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1. About

Like a lawyer in a jury trial, a writer must convince her audience of the validity of her argument by using evidence effectively. As a writer, you must also use evidence to persuade your readers to accept your claims. But how do you use evidence to your advantage? By leading your reader through your reasoning.

The types of evidence you use change from discipline to discipline—you might use quotations from a poem or a literary critic, for example, in a literature paper; you might use data from an experiment in a lab report.

The process of putting together your argument is called analysis—it interprets evidence in order to support, test, and/or refine a claim. The chief claim in an analytical essay is called the thesis. A thesis provides the controlling idea for a paper and should be original (that is, not completely obvious), assertive, and arguable. A strong thesis also requires solid evidence to support and develop it because without evidence, a claim is merely an unsubstantiated idea or opinion.

This pamphlet will cover these basic issues:

- Incorporating evidence effectively.
- Integrating quotations smoothly.
- Citing your sources.

2. Incorporating Evidence Into Your Essay

When Should You Incorporate Evidence?

Once you have formulated your claim, your thesis (see the WTS pamphlet, “How to Write a Thesis Statement,” for ideas and tips), you should use evidence to help strengthen your thesis and any assertion you make that relates to your thesis. Here are some ways to work evidence into your writing:

- Offer evidence that agrees with your stance up to a point, then add to it with ideas of your own.
- Present evidence that contradicts your stance, and then argue against (refute) that evidence and therefore strengthen your position.
- Use sources against each other, as if they were experts on a panel discussing your proposition.
- Use quotations to support your assertion, not merely to state or restate your claim.

Weak and Strong Uses of Evidence

In order to use evidence effectively, you need to integrate it smoothly into your essay by following this pattern:

- State your claim.
- Give your evidence, remembering to relate it to the claim.
- Comment on the evidence to show how it supports the claim.

To see the differences between strong and weak uses of evidence, here are two paragraphs.

Weak use of evidence

Today, we are too self-centered. Most families no longer sit down to eat together, preferring instead to eat on the go while rushing to the next appointment (Gleick 148). Everything is about what we want.

This is a **weak** example of evidence because the evidence is not related to the claim. What does the claim about self-centeredness have to do with families eating together? The writer doesn't explain the connection.

The same evidence can be used to support the same claim, but only with the addition of a clear connection between claim and evidence, and some analysis of the evidence cited.

Stronger use of evidence

Today, Americans are too self-centered. Even our families don't matter as much anymore as they once did. Other people and activities take precedence. In fact, the evidence shows that most American families no longer eat together, preferring instead to eat on the go while rushing to the next appointment (Gleick 148). Sit-down meals are a time to share and connect with others; however, that connection has become less valued, as families begin to prize individual activities over shared time, promoting self-centeredness over group identity.

This is a far better example, as the evidence is more smoothly integrated into the text, the link between the claim and the evidence is strengthened, and the evidence itself is analyzed to provide support for the claim.

3. Using Quotations: A Special Type of Evidence

One effective way to support your claim is to use quotations. However, because quotations involve someone else's words, you need to take special care to integrate this kind of evidence into your essay. Here are two examples using quotations, one less effective and one more so.

Ineffective Use of Quotation

Today, we are too self-centered. “We are consumers-on-the-run . . . the very notion of the family meal as a sit-down occasion is vanishing. Adults and children alike eat . . . on the way to their next activity” (Gleick 148). Everything is about what we want.

This example is ineffective because the quotation is not integrated with the writer’s ideas. Notice how the writer has dropped the quotation into the paragraph without making any connection between it and the claim. Furthermore, she has not discussed the quotation’s significance, which makes it difficult for the reader to see the relationship between the evidence and the writer’s point.

More Effective Use of Quotation

*Today, Americans are too self-centered. Even our families don’t matter as much anymore as they once did. Other people and activities take precedence, as James Gleick says in his book, *Faster*. “We are consumers-on-the-run . . . the very notion of the family meal as a sit-down occasion is vanishing. Adults and children alike eat . . . on the way to their next activity” (148). Sit-down meals are a time to share and connect with others; however, that connection has become less valued, as families begin to prize individual activities over shared time, promoting self-centeredness over group identity.*

The second example is more effective because it follows the guidelines for incorporating evidence into an essay. Notice, too, that it uses a lead-in phrase (“ . . . as James Gleick says in his book, *Faster*”) to introduce the direct quotation. This lead-in phrase helps to integrate the quotation with the writer’s ideas. Also notice that the writer discusses and comments upon the quotation immediately afterwards, which allows the reader to see the quotation’s connection to the writer’s point.

Remember: Discussing the significance of your evidence develops and expands your paper!

4. Citing your sources

Evidence appears in essays in the form of quotations and paraphrasing. Both forms of evidence must be cited in your text. Citing evidence means distinguishing other writers’ information from your own ideas and giving credit to your sources. There are plenty of general ways to do citations. Note both the lead-in phrases and the punctuation (except the brackets) in the following examples:

- **Quoting:** According to Source X, “[direct quotation]” ([date or page #]).
- **Paraphrasing:** Although Source Z argues that [his/her point in your own words], a better way to view the issue is [your own point] ([citation]).
- **Summarizing:** In her book, Source P’s main points are Q, R, and S [citation].

Your job during the course of your essay is to persuade your readers that your claims are feasible and are the most effective way of interpreting the evidence.

5. Questions to Ask Yourself When Revising Your Paper

- Have I offered my reader evidence to substantiate each assertion I make in my paper?
- Do I thoroughly explain why/how my evidence backs up my ideas?
- Do I avoid generalizing in my paper by specifically explaining how my evidence is representative?
- Do I provide evidence that not only confirms but also qualifies my paper’s main claims?
- Do I use evidence to test and evolve my ideas, rather than to just confirm them?
- Do I cite my sources thoroughly and correctly?

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