**Using Evidence Effectively**

A blue and black background with text

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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**.

**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.***

As writers, we sometimes assume that our readers already know what we are talking about; we may be wary of elaborating too much because we think the point is obvious. But readers can’t read our minds: although they may be familiar with many of the ideas we are discussing, they don’t know what we are trying to do with those ideas unless we indicate it through explanations, organization, transitions, and so forth. Try to spell out the connections that you were making in your mind when you chose your evidence, decided where to place it in your paper, and drew conclusions based on it.

**Here are some questions you can ask yourself about a particular bit of evidence:**

1. OK, I’ve just stated this point, but so what? Why is it interesting? Why should anyone care?
2. What does this information imply?
3. What are the consequences of thinking this way or looking at a problem this way?
4. I’ve just described what something is like or how I see it, but why is it like that? How does it connect to something else I’ve mentioned, compared, or contrasted?
5. I’ve just said that something happens—so how does it happen? How does it come to be the way it is?
6. Why is this information important? Why does it matter?
7. How is this idea related to my thesis? What connections exist between them? Does it support my thesis? If so, how does it do that?
8. Can I give an example to illustrate this point?

Answering these questions may help you explain how your evidence is related to your overall argument.

### **Types of Evidence**

### **Quotations**

When you quote, you are reproducing another writer’s words exactly as they appear on the page. **Here are some tips to help you decide when to use quotations:**

1. Quote if you can’t say it any better and the author’s words are particularly brilliant, witty, edgy, distinctive, a good illustration of a point you’re making, or otherwise interesting.
2. Quote if you are using a particularly authoritative source and you need the author’s expertise to back up your point.
3. Quote if you are analyzing diction, tone, or a writer’s use of a specific word or phrase.
4. Quote if you are taking a position that relies on the reader’s understanding exactly what another writer says about the topic.

### **Paraphrasing**

When you paraphrase, you take a specific section of a text and put it into your own words. Putting it into your own words doesn’t mean just changing or rearranging a few of the author’s words: to paraphrase well and avoid plagiarism, try setting your source aside and restating the sentence or paragraph you have just read, as though you were describing it to another person. Paraphrasing is different than summary because a paraphrase focuses on a particular, fairly short bit of text (like a phrase, sentence, or paragraph). You’ll need to indicate when you are paraphrasing someone else’s text by citing your source correctly, just as you would with a quotation.

**When might you want to paraphrase?**

1. Paraphrase when you want to introduce a writer’s position, but his or her original words aren’t special enough to quote.
2. Paraphrase when you are supporting a particular point and need to draw on a certain place in a text that supports your point—for example, when one paragraph in a source is especially relevant.
3. Paraphrase when you want to present a writer’s view on a topic that differs from your position or that of another writer; you can then refute writer’s specific points in your own words after you paraphrase.
4. Paraphrase when you want to comment on a particular example that another writer uses.
5. Paraphrase when you need to present information that’s unlikely to be questioned.

**Summary**

When you summarize, you are offering an overview of an entire text, or at least a lengthy section of a text. Summary is useful when you are providing background information, grounding your own argument, or mentioning a source as a counter-argument. A summary is less nuanced than paraphrased material. When you are summarizing someone else’s argument or ideas, be sure this is clear to the reader and cite your source appropriately.

### **Statistics, data, charts, graphs, photographs, illustrations**

Sometimes the best evidence for your argument is a hard fact or visual representation of a fact. This type of evidence can be a solid backbone for your argument, but you still need to create context for your reader and draw the connections you want him or her to make. Remember that statistics, data, charts, graph, photographs, and illustrations are all open to interpretation. Guide the reader through the interpretation process. Again, always, cite the origin of your evidence if you didn’t produce the material you are using yourself.

### **Color code your paper! A strategy for reviewing and reflecting on your work**

You will need three highlighters or colored pencils for this exercise. Use one color to highlight general assertions. These will typically be the topic sentences in your paper. Next, use another color to highlight the specific evidence you provide for each assertion (including quotations, paraphrased or summarized material, statistics, examples, and your own ideas). Lastly, use another color to highlight analysis of your evidence. Which assertions are key to your overall argument? Which ones are especially contestable? How much evidence do you have for each assertion? How much analysis? In general, you should have at least as much analysis as you do evidence, or your paper runs the risk of being more summary than argument. The more controversial an assertion is, the more evidence you may need to provide in order to persuade your reader.

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