

on Evidence:

****Excerpted from *The Language of Composition*, 2nd edition and *Everything's an Argument*, 5th edition.**

Regardless of the type of evidence a writer chooses to use, it should always be relevant, accurate, and sufficient. Relevant evidence is evidence that specifically applies to the argument being made. To argue that a particular car is superior from a dependability standpoint, bringing in evidence about its maintenance record would be relevant, but talking about its hand-tooled leather seats would not. Generally, good writers do not leave the relevance of a piece of evidence to the reader's imagination; they explicitly spell out what the relationship is between an example and the argument at hand.

Presenting accurate information means taking care to quote sources correctly without misrepresenting what the sources are saying or taking the information out of context. One way to ensure that you have accurate evidence is to get it from a credible source. Think carefully about the bias any source might have. Is it partisan or backed financially by a company or industry group? Even statistical data can be inaccurate if it is from a source that has gathered the data in a way that fits its own agenda. Accuracy can also be a matter of the audience's perception. You should choose sources that they will find credible. If you want accurate dependability information about a car, some reliable sources might be a reputable mechanic, a magazine reviewer who has compared the car's performance to other similar cars, or simply someone who has owned the car for a long time.

Finally, you should include a sufficient amount of evidence to support your thesis. If you based your entire argument about the car's dependability on an interview with a single mechanic, that would not be persuasive. A mechanic only sees the cars that break down, so perhaps his viewpoint is overly negative.

Types of Evidence

First-Hand Evidence:

First-hand evidence is something you *know*, whether it's from personal experience, anecdotes you've heard from others, observations, or your general knowledge of events. It comes from research that you have carried out or been closely involved with, and much of this kind of research requires you to collect and examine data.

Types of first-hand evidence:

Personal Experience

The most common type of first-hand evidence is personal experience. Bringing in personal experience adds a human element and can be an effective way to appeal to pathos. For example, when writing about whether you do or do not support single-sex classrooms, you might describe your experience as a student, or you might use your observations about your school or classmates to inform your argument. Personal experience is a great way to make an abstract issue more human, and it is an especially effective technique in the introduction and conclusion of an argument. Personal experience can interest readers and draw them in, but they'll need more than just your perspective to be persuaded.

Personal experience works best if the writer can speak as an insider. For instance, you can speak knowledgeably about the issue of single-sex classrooms because you have inside knowledge about classrooms and how they work.

Observations

“What,” you may wonder, “could be easier than observing something?” You just choose a subject, look at it closely, and record what you see and hear. If observing were easy, however, all eyewitnesses would provide reliable accounts. Yet experience shows that several people who have observed the same phenomenon generally offer different, sometimes even contradictory, evidence on the basis of those observations. (When TWA flight 800 exploded off the coast of New Jersey in 1996, eyewitnesses gave various accounts, some claiming that they saw what might have been a missile streaking toward the passenger jet. The official report found that an internal electrical short likely ignited vapors in a fuel tank.) Trained observers say that recording an observation accurately requires intense concentration and mental agility.

Anecdotes

First-hand evidence also includes anecdotes about other people that you’ve either observed or been told about. Like personal experience anecdotes can be a useful way to appeal to pathos.

Current Events

Current events are another type of evidence that is accessed first-hand through observation. Staying abreast of what is happening locally, nationally, and globally ensures a store of information that can be used as evidence in arguments. Remember that current events can be interpreted in many ways, so seek out multiple perspectives and be on the lookout for bias.

Interviews

Some evidence is best obtained through direct interviews. If you can talk with an expert-in person, on the phone, or online—you might obtain information you couldn’t have gotten through any other type of research. In addition to an expert opinion, you might ask for firsthand accounts, biographical information, or suggestions of other places to look or other people to consult. Newspapers often use interviews to add perspective to stories or to check the authenticity of claims.

Surveys and Questionnaires

Surveys usually require the use of questionnaires. Questions should be clear, easy to understand, and designed so that the respondents’ answers can be easily analyzed. Questions that ask respondents to say “yes” or “no” or to rank items on a scale are particularly easy to tabulate. Because tabulation can take time and effort, limit the number of questions you ask.

Experiments

Some arguments can be supported by evidence that is gathered through experiments. In the sciences, data from experiments conducted under rigorously controlled conditions are highly valued. For other kinds of writing, more informal experiments may be acceptable, especially if they’re intended to provide only part of the support for an argument.

If you want to argue, for instance, that the recipes in *Gourmet* magazine are impossibly tedious to follow and take far more time than the average person wishes to spend preparing food, you might ask five or six people to conduct an experiment—following two recipes from a recent issue and recording and timing every step. The evidence that you gather from this informal experiment could provide some concrete support—by way of specific examples—for your contention.

But such experiments should be taken with a grain of salt (maybe organic in this case!). They may not be effective with certain audiences, and if they can easily be

attacked as skewed or sloppily done (“The people you asked to make these recipes couldn’t cook a Pop-Tart”), then they may do more harm than good.

Second-Hand Evidence:

Second-hand evidence is evidence that is accessed through research, reading, and investigation. It includes factual and historical information, expert opinion, and quantitative data. Anytime you cite what someone else knows, not what you know, you are using second-hand evidence. While citing second-hand evidence may occasionally appeal to pathos and certainly may establish a writer’s ethos, the central appeal is to logos—reason and logic.

Historical Information

A common type of second-hand evidence is historical information—verifiable facts that a writer knows from research. This kind of evidence can provide back-ground and context to current debates; it also can help establish the writer’s ethos because it shows that he or she has taken the time and effort to research the matter and become informed. One possible pitfall is that historical events are complicated. You’ll want to keep your description of the events brief, but be sure not to misrepresent the events. Historical information is often used to develop a point of comparison or contrast to a more contemporary situation.

Expert Opinion

Most everyone is an expert on something! And how often do we bolster our viewpoint by pointing out that so-and-so agrees with us? Expert opinion is a more formal variation on that common practice. An expert is someone who has published research on a topic or whose job or experience gives him or her specialized knowledge. Sometimes, you might cite the viewpoint of an individual who is an “expert” in a local matter but who is not widely recognized. If, for instance, you are writing about school policy, you might cite the opinion of a teacher or student government officer. The important point is to make certain that your expert is seen as credible by your audience so that his or her opinion will add weight to your argument.

Quantitative Evidence

Quantitative evidence includes things that can be represented in numbers: statistics, surveys, polls, census information. This type of evidence can be persuasive in its appeal to logos. Amy Domini cites numerical evidence in her essay to support her contention that “[f]ast food is a way of life. In America, the average person eats it more than 150 times a year. In 2007, sales for the 400 largest U.W. based fast-food chains totaled \$227 billion, up 7 percent from 2006.”