

Using Textual Evidence

Many papers that you write in college will require you to make an argument; this means that you must take a position on the subject you are discussing and support that position with evidence. It is important that:

- ✓ you use the right kind of evidence
- ✓ you use it effectively
- ✓ you have an appropriate amount of it

Before you begin gathering information for possible use as evidence in your argument, you need to be sure that you understand the purpose of your assignment. If you are working on a project for a class, look carefully at the assignment prompt. It may give you clues about what sorts of evidence you will need. Ask yourself the following questions:

- ✓ Does the instructor mention any books you should use in writing your paper or the names of any authors who have written about your topic?
- ✓ How long should your paper be (longer works may require more, or more varied, evidence)?
- ✓ What themes or topics come up in the text of the prompt?

Instructors in different academic fields expect different kinds of arguments and evidence—your chemistry paper might include graphs, charts, statistics, and other quantitative data as evidence, whereas your English paper might include passages from a novel, examples of recurring symbols, or discussions of characterization in the novel. Consider what kinds of sources and evidence you have seen in course readings and lectures.

Primary versus Secondary Sources

Many researchers distinguish between primary and secondary sources of evidence (in this case, “primary” means “first” or “original,” not “most important”). Primary sources include original documents, photographs, interviews, and so forth. Secondary sources present information that has already been processed or interpreted by someone else. For example, if you are writing a paper about the movie “The Matrix,” the movie itself, an interview with the director, and production photos could serve as primary sources of evidence. A movie review from a magazine or a collection of essays about the film would be secondary sources.

Does evidence speak for itself?

Absolutely not. After you introduce evidence into your writing, you must say why and how this evidence supports your argument. In other words, you must explain the significance of the evidence and its function in your paper. What turns a fact or piece of information into evidence is

the connection it has with a larger claim or argument: evidence is always evidence for or against something, and you must make that link clear.

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. Remember, you can always cut prose from your paper later if you decide that you are stating the obvious.

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

- ✓ OK, I've just stated this point, but so what? Why is it interesting? Why should anyone care?
- ✓ What does this information imply?
- ✓ What are the consequences of thinking this way or looking at a problem this way?
- ✓ I've just described what something is like or how I see it, but why is it like that?
- ✓ I've just said that something happens—so how does it happen? How does it come to be the way it is?
- ✓ Why is this information important? Why does it matter?
- ✓ 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?
- ✓ 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.

How can I incorporate evidence into my paper?

There are many ways to present your evidence. Often, your evidence will be included as text in the body of your paper, as a quotation, paraphrase, or summary. Sometimes you might include graphs, charts, or tables; excerpts from an interview; or photographs or illustrations with accompanying captions.

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 cannot say it any better and the author's words are particularly brilliant, witty, edgy, distinctive, a good illustration of a point you are 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.

Be sure to introduce each quotation you use, and always cite your sources. See our handout on [quotations](#) for more details on when to quote and how to format quotations.

Like all pieces of evidence, a quotation cannot speak for itself. If you end a paragraph with a quotation, that may be a sign that you have neglected to discuss the importance of the quotation in terms of your argument. It is important to avoid “plop quotations,” that is, quotations that are just dropped into your paper without any introduction, discussion, or follow-up.

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, short bit of text (like a phrase, sentence, or paragraph). You will 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 is 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 counterargument. A summary is less nuanced than paraphrased material. It can be the most effective way to incorporate many sources when you do not have a lot of space. 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 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.