

Evidence

The Importance of Evidence:

Claims and reasons are the framework of an argument, but *evidence* is what makes the case. Evidence—various items of information that support a claim as well as the reasons supporting a claim—is what you look for in any pattern of argument. It answers the question “What have you got to go on?” Only evidence, carefully selected and clearly presented, permits a writer to present an argument fully and convincingly. If the evidence in an argument is too sparse, it will not convince an audience. If it is too flimsy—based on mere opinion, hearsay, or colorful comparisons or analogies—it will not support an otherwise valid claim (from *To the Point*, Gilbert H. Muller and Harvey S. Wiener, eds.).

Types of Evidence:

Evidence can consist of:

Facts

Specific examples (not hypothetical examples)

Specific cases and events

Statistics and other forms of data

Expert opinion

Personal experience (if used judiciously and in a representative way)

Scientific observation

Field research

Controlled experimentation

Tables, graphs, and other visual documents

In all instances, the most distinctive feature of evidence is that it supports a relevant claim.

Evaluating Evidence:

The chain of argument is never complete without authoritative and compelling evidence. When you read an essay, ask the following questions about the nature of the evidence presented:

1. Are the examples relevant and convincing?
2. Is the evidence presented clearly?
3. Is the evidence used to support a claim, and is it sufficient?
4. If statistics appear, are they relevant, accurate, current, complete, and from a reliable source?
5. If the writer offers quotations or expert testimony, is it from a knowledgeable, trustworthy, and authoritative source?

Evaluate the following examples:

1. In his 2009 article “Omnivore’s Delusion,” Blake Hurst argues in defense of the industrial farming practice of keeping animals in cages, claiming that cages are actually better for the animals. As evidence, he provides the following story about a neighbor with a cage-free turkey farm:

Weasels were a problem, but not as much a threat as one of our typically violent early summer thunder storms. It seems that turkeys, at least young ones, are not smart enough to come in out of the rain, and will stand outside in a downpour, with beaks open and eyes skyward, until they drown. One night Niemann lost 4,000 turkeys to drowning, along with his dream and his farm.

Is this effective evidence to support his argument that animals should be caged? Why or why not?

2. In his 2011 article “Time to Think About Torture,” Jonathan Alter argues that, following the 9/11 attacks, Americans should consider using some methods of torture to combat terrorism. He argues that one method that should be used is sodium pentothal, which he considers psychological torture. He states:

Short of physical torture, there’s always sodium pentothal (“truth serum”). The FBI is eager to try it, and deserves the change. Unfortunately, truth serum, first used on spies in World War II, makes suspects gabby but not necessarily truthful. The same goes for even the harshest torture. When the subject breaks, he often lies. Prisoners “have only one objective—to end the pain,” says retired Col. Kenneth Allard, who was trained in interrogation. “It’s a huge limitation.”

Do you see evidence here? If so, is it effective at supporting the claim?

3. In his book *Coercion: Why We Listen to What “They” Say*, Douglas Rushkoff argues that we are unknowingly subject to techniques of coercion and persuasion that affect our behavior. As support, he provides the following:

The pretty young “sales associate” at the Gap may not be the best judge of how that pair of blue jeans looks on us, or of which belt we should wear to a job interview. Even though she seems genuinely concerned with our well-being, we must not forget that she’s been trained in the art of the “upsell” and is herself under the influence of a barrage of incentives conceived at corporate headquarters.

Is this example of the sales associate at the Gap evidence? Why or why not?

4. In his book *Stumbling on Happiness*, Daniel Gilbert argues that many of the beliefs we have about what leads to happiness aren’t true. One of the beliefs he claims isn’t true is that having children makes us happy. As evidence, he provides a study of marital satisfaction of people who have children. He provides a graph, and on the vertical line is a measurement that goes to the number “56”, indicating marital satisfaction. The horizontal line begins at “Married Without Children” and goes to “Pre-school Children,” “School Children,” “Teenagers,” “First Child Gone,” and “Empty Nest.” The graph shows the “Marital Satisfaction” at 56 during the “Married Without Children” stage, but it drops to 47 in the “pre-school” stage. It hits the lowest numbers during the “Teenage” stage, but goes back to 56 during the empty nest stage. Is this good evidence that children don’t lead to happiness? Why or why not?