

Notes on Writing about Literature: A Brief Guide to Better Writing
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Using Evidence to Strengthen Your Arguments

(from Prof. Allison Pease's Writing Center workshop)

- What Is Evidence?

Evidence is the facts or sources that support your written argument.

In a literature course, for instance, evidence would be a quotation from the text that helps you make your point. In a write-up of a scientific experiment, evidence would be the data you collected in your experiment that prove or disprove a thesis.

- Why Do We Need Evidence?

Evidence is central to any written argument because it provides the facts around which you create your argument, your opinion. Without evidence, an argument is a windy, flimsy statement of one person's opinion. With evidence, an argument is grounded in facts and given shape. Evidence is the critical link that helps you prove your points.

- Can Evidence Speak for Itself?

No. This is where you come in. It is simply not enough to drop a quotation into your paper and expect your reader to be convinced of your point.

- So How Can We Speak for and through Evidence?

When you use evidence, your role is to show your reader that evidence supports your argument. Consider your role as writer analogous to that of a lawyer in a court of law. When you introduce evidence, you must tell the jury--your readers--why this evidence supports your argument. Evidence must be analyzed and interpreted. What does the evidence say and how should your reader understand it? How does the evidence support the larger ideas at work in the paper? You need to make these connections for your reader.

Examples

- Unsuccessful Use of Evidence (as if it spoke for itself):

Frederick Douglass gains self-confidence when he fights back against the cruel slave-owner Mr. Covey. Douglass notes that the battle “rekindled the few expiring embers of freedom and revived within me a sense of my own manhood. It recalled the departed self-confidence and inspired me again with the determination to be free” (Douglass, 1845, p. 43). This quotation alone captures the essence of Douglass’s feelings after his self-reliance was challenged by his slave master and he prevailed.

Problem: This use of evidence does not work because the author does not show why the evidence is important, or what it does. The writer repeats rather than analyzes what is said. Her thesis is about self-reliance, so she should focus on how this quotation shows that Douglass became self-reliant.

- Another Unsuccessful Use of Evidence (the writer “dumps” the quotation and does not explain it):

As a self-conscious boy, Douglass relied on other slaves’ mistakes to protect him. He was always aware of how white men could trick slaves and make money for themselves and so he never trusted white men. “White men have been known to encourage slaves to escape, and then, to get the reward, catch them and return to their masters” (p. 25).

Problem: Not only does the writer fail to introduce the quotation with his own words but he also “dumps” the evidence. What did you learn from this paragraph? What’s the author’s point? Are the first and second sentences connected? To leave a quotation at the end of a paragraph is to leave your job undone. You must tell the reader why the quotation is significant and show how the quotation connects back to your main idea.

- Successful Use of Evidence to Support Ideas:

Emerson believes that people must accept who they are and embrace their talents and their minds. We've all been taught the saying, "No pain, no gain." Emerson goes one step further, claiming that "A man is relieved and gay when he has put his heart into his work and done his best, but what he has said or done otherwise, shall give him no peace. It is a deliverance that does not

deliver" (Emerson, 1993, p. 20). He is explaining here that one's heart truly needs to be dedicated to his task in order to reach fulfillment. Achieving fulfillment is, in essence, a step towards self-reliance.

What Is Good Here: This author uses evidence, an actual quotation and correct citation of author, year, and page number, a) to provide a scholarly record of where to find this reference, and b) to support his points. The writer's thinking here is clear in that he analyzes the evidence and draws conclusions from it.

- What to Keep in Mind:

Whenever you use a quotation, show your reader the thinking that went into choosing that quotation. What does it mean and why is it relevant to your point? Evidence is the framework of an argument, but you must do the arguing around that framework. If you want your reader to believe your argument, you must do the thinking for your reader. It is up to you to tell your reader what to think about the evidence you provide.