

# Essay Writing

Unit 3A – How to Use Evidence: Developing an Argument Out of Evidence

## INDEPENDENT LEARNING RESOURCES

Learning Centre



THE UNIVERSITY OF  
SYDNEY

*This unit's place in the whole module:*

Unit 1A How to be analytical:  
What is analysis?

Unit 1B How to be analytical:  
Setting up a taxonomy

Unit 2A How to structure an essay:  
Developing an essay structure

Unit 2B How to structure an essay:  
Writing introductions and conclusions

**Unit 3A How to use evidence:  
Developing an argument out of the evidence**

Unit 3B How to use evidence:  
Supporting your argument with the evidence

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Unit 4A How to develop an argument:  
Being persuasive

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Being critical

# UNIT 3A HOW TO USE EVIDENCE: DEVELOPING AN ARGUMENT OUT OF EVIDENCE

## OBJECTIVES OF THIS UNIT

After you have finished this unit, we hope you will be able to:

- identify appropriate evidence for academic contexts
- recognize different arguments in the readings you are doing
- identify your own position by assessing and evaluating these arguments
- develop an argument out of the evidence to support your own position

## IDENTIFYING YOUR PROBLEMS WITH USING EVIDENCE

If you have been having difficulty in using evidence when you are preparing and writing your essays and assignments, your marker may have made a comment on your writing similar to these:

- *"You have made some good points but you have not substantiated them."*
- *"Where are your references?"*
- *"You need to show me that you have done the reading on this topic."*
- *"I know the literature myself so you don't need to just tell it all to me: What I want to know is - what is your position?"*
- *"You have plagiarised parts of this essay from several sources. See me!"*

## INTRODUCTION TO THIS UNIT

So far in this module, we have looked at the process of being analytical rather than just descriptive, and at how an analytical structure can be developed for an essay. In this unit, we will be looking at the use of evidence in essay writing. There are two main reasons why we use evidence. Firstly, we read what has been published about a topic in order to learn about the topic, and to develop our own conceptual understanding of the topic. In this way, we are able to develop a point of view for an essay. Once we have developed these concepts and a particular point of view for the essay, we have to present this point of view to our reader. In order to convince the reader of our point of view, we use evidence from the published literature to persuade the reader that our point of view is justifiable. This module will give you practice in these two different ways we use evidence.

### 1. WHAT IS APPROPRIATE EVIDENCE FOR ACADEMIC ESSAYS?

There are many different types of evidence that we can use to support our ideas about the world, as depicted below:

<b>Where from?</b>	•personal experience •others' experience
<b>How presented?</b>	•in print •not in print

<b>What for?</b>	•academic purposes •non-academic purposes
<b>How close?</b>	•primary source •secondary source •tertiary source

When you are writing at university, you would normally use substantiating evidence from the experience of others rather than from your personal experience; from printed rather than non-printed publications; and from publications intended for an academic press rather than those for a non-academic audience. However, this will depend on the subject you are studying and the type of essay you have to write. For example, for an essay in the performing arts, you may have to refer formally to your personal experience, and to non-print forms of expression. For an essay in a social studies subject, you may have to analyse government policy papers or other documents which are not intended for an academic purpose.

With all types of evidence, there is another important way in which they can be categorised. Primary sources are closest to the original event or experience. For example, a historical primary source might be a letter; a literary primary source is the literature itself; a visual arts primary source is the creative form itself; a scientific primary source might be a scientist's laboratory notes on an experiment in progress. Secondary sources of evidence are one step removed from the primary source. For example, a history book is based on many primary sources of evidence; a literary critique is based on the primary source of the piece of literature itself; a scientific report is based on the experimental notes in progress; and so on. Tertiary sources are one step further removed again. For example, a journal article in history may be an analysis of different historian's approaches to the same primary sources of evidence; a scientific textbook may be a digestion of the discoveries of many scientific experiments...

One of the common difficulties students have in writing essays is knowing which type of evidence is required or expected. The essay that we examined about "power in Lord of the Flies" in Unit 1 of this module is a good example of the kind of problems that students have. The sources for the unsuccessful essay were all the primary source of the novel itself, and may have been appropriate for a first-year English literature course. However, for a first-year course in Government, it was expected that secondary sources of evidence from the field of political science should have been used to substantiate the essay's points.

### Exercise 1

Read the following two sections from essays and decide which one uses evidence which is only from the writer's personal experience of the world.

- a) *When considering the content debate, the most controversial aspect must be that of televised violence. Seemingly today, violence is a common theme in our television programs. Programs from America like Starsky and Hutch, Hawaii Five-O among others, all have violence as a central theme. Programs from Britain like The Professionals and Callan are much the same if not worse in their portrayal of violence. Added to this now, comes our own homegrown programs like Cop Shop, Division 4 and Homicide which are spinoffs from American ideas.*
- b) *Most children are subjected daily to televised violence and aggression, whether in cartoons, or performed by human actors, or by real people in the news. It has been estimated (Parker, 1983: 38) that by graduation from high school, the average American child has seen 18000 television murders; and it seems probable that this would significantly affect the child's aggressive behaviour.*

☺ **KEY** Now check your answer in the answer key before going on.

## 2. IDENTIFYING AN ARGUMENT IN THE SOURCES

When you are preparing for an essay through reading literature on the topic, you will probably be reading from different sources, often with different points of view. It is important that you can recognize these different points of view to help you understand the topic more. Sometimes the different views that you read on a topic are very strongly in conflict with each other, particularly in areas that are quite controversial.

### Exercise 2

Examine the information in the following two sources which are about the effects of passive smoking, and answer the following questions about them:

- a) What position does each source take about the effects of passive smoking?
- b) Are these sources reliable?
- c) How would you assess the validity of the information presented in these sources?

#### Example 1

Excerpt from Tobacco Institute of Australia Limited (1987) *The Public Smoking Issue: a review of the current scientific and social situation concerning the public smoking issue*, Sydney.

Excerpt from the text:

*Although the extent to which environmental tobacco smoke may bother or annoy individuals under normal conditions has not been established scientifically<sup>10</sup>, it has been suggested that tobacco smoke is at most a minor annoyance for many individuals<sup>221-223</sup>. It has also been suggested that extreme reactions to tobacco smoke exposure may have a strong emotional or psychological basis.<sup>224-225</sup>*

Excerpt from the reference list of those references used in the text:

10. Rylander, R (1984) "Working perspectives", in Rylander, R et al [Eds], "ETS - Environmental Tobacco Smoke: Report from a Workshop on Effects and Exposure Levels", **European Journal of Respiratory Diseases: Supplement**, 133(65): 143-145.
221. Civil Aeronautics Board (1982) "Airline consumer complaints down 31% in first half of 1982", **CAB News**, 20 September, 1982.
222. Cohen, R (1978) "Effect of smoking on non-smokers", Statement at U.S. Congress, House Committee on Agriculture, Sub-committee on Tobacco, Hearing 95th Congress, 2nd Session, 7 September 1978, Government Printing Office, Washington, 69-75.
223. Response Analysis Corporation (1984) "Overall Report: Smoking and Productivity in the Work Place".
224. Feinhandler, S (1978) "Effect of smoking on non-smokers", Statement at U.S. Congress, House Committee on Agriculture, Sub-committee on Tobacco, Hearing 95th Congress, 2nd Session, 7 September 1978, Government Printing Office, Washington, 56-63.
225. Lehrer, S et al (1984) "Tobacco smoke 'sensitivity' - is there an immunologic basis?", **Journal of Allergy and Clinical Immunology**, 73(2): 240-245.

Here are the questions again:

- a) What position does each source take about the effects of passive smoking?
- b) Are these sources reliable?
- c) How would you assess the validity of the information presented in these sources?

*Example 2*

Excerpt from Winstanley, M [Ed] (1989) ***Tobacco in Australia: Facts and Issues***, Action on Smoking and Health Limited (ASH Australia), 5th Floor 64 Kippax Street, Surry Hills, Sydney.

Excerpt from the text:

*There is an increasing amount of scientific evidence that the breathing of tobacco-smoke polluted air by non-smokers can lead to serious harm, such as increased bronchitis, pneumonia and other chest illnesses in children, lung cancer and other lung diseases. This is of course in addition to the well known 'irritant' effects of tobacco smoke to the eyes, nose, throat and airways passages.<sup>22</sup>*

Excerpt from the reference list of the reference shown in the text:

22. The Health Consequences of Involuntary Smoking. A report of the Surgeon General. US Department of Health and Human Services, Public Health Service, Centers for Disease Control, Center for Health Promotion and Education, Office on Smoking and Health, Rockville, Maryland, 1986.

☺ **KEY** Now check your answers in the Answer Key before going on.

### 3. IDENTIFYING YOUR POSITION IN THE ARGUMENT

When you are researching a topic, you will probably come across a range of positions, sometimes extremely opposed to each other. You will then have to evaluate each position and decide why one position is more valid than another. This will help you to decide what your own position is, so that you can establish the thesis of your essay.

#### Exercise 3

If you had to make a position statement to identify where you stand on the effects of passive smoking, would it be similar to 1) or 2) above? Would it be stronger or weaker than those positions? Try to identify your position on the following gradient of views.

passive smoking  
causes lung cancer

passive smoking increases  
the risk of developing  
lung cancer

passive smoking can lead to  
serious harm such as lung and  
chest illnesses, including lung  
cancer

exposure to environmental tobacco  
smoke gives rise to some risk of lung  
cancer

the risk of developing lung cancer from passive  
smoking is variable

the effect of passive smoking on the respiratory system  
is negligible

an increased risk of lung cancer due to passive smoking has not  
been established

there is no convincing evidence that passive smoking causes lung  
cancer

passive smoking under normal conditions is at most a minor annoyance for  
many individuals

exposure to environmental tobacco smoke under extreme conditions may provoke  
complaints of irritation and annoyance

reactions to environmental tobacco smoke are psychological or emotional

#### 4. DEVELOPING YOUR ARGUMENT OUT OF THE EVIDENCE

Once you have done enough reading on your topic, you should begin to get a feel for the range of positions put forward by different authors, and also a feel for where you stand on the topic. This next exercise will help you to go through the process of reading different positions, making judgements about which ones are most valid, and then deciding your own position.

##### Exercise 4

Here are a number of pieces of information about tobacco growth, distribution and use, which you have found in preparation for an essay on the topic "Discuss the economic effects of tobacco use". On the following page are some steps to go through in this exercise.

##### The evidence:

1. *Tobacco is easy to grow and provides a ready source of cash to the small farmers who still constitute most of the world's producers.*  
United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation, Yearbook 1977, Volume 31. Rome, UNFAO, 1978, p290.
2. *Overall, despite the payments to small farmers and distributors and the substantial revenues to commercial firms and governments, tobacco becomes a net cost to society whenever a large proportion of the population smokes enough to suffer the impact of tobacco-induced diseases.*  
Tobacco - Hazards to Health and Life. NSW Cancer Council, Position Paper, 1985, p21.
3. *The land used to raise tobacco is not available to raise food, and this too may contribute to malnutrition and higher mortality in developing countries.*  
United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation, Yearbook 1977, Volume 31. Rome, UNFAO, 1978, p38.
4. *In China, about 60% of the price of a packet of cigarettes goes to the government in the form of taxes.*  
Mathews, J. Between Puffs, Chinese are told of Cigarette Perils. Washington Post, 6/9/78, p17.
5. *Thousands of small retail traders would be severely limited in their ability to continue their business and to employ shop assistants if not for sales of tobacco.*  
Small Retailers Association Report, 1982, p42.
6. *Yet, in the United States at least, where tobacco was first developed as a colonial product for export, the health costs of domestically consumed tobacco now far outweigh the dollar returns to producers, manufacturers, exporters, and tax collectors. While total consumer spending (plus exports) now amounts to about \$19 billion and supports jobs for 1.3 million people, the cost to US citizens in lost production from sickness, health care, and loss of life and property destroyed by fire totals \$27.5 billion.*  
Miller, R.H. The Economic Importance of the US Tobacco Industry. Washington D.C., US Department of Agriculture, May 1982, p187.

**The steps to follow in this exercise:**

- a) Read all the evidence through once before going on. Then go back and read each piece in turn, and answer the following questions:
- b) Is this piece of evidence relevant to the essay question - "Discuss the economic effects of tobacco use"? (Put a line through any pieces of evidence which are not relevant.)
- c) Is this piece of evidence written by a reputable person or group? (You might still be able to use evidence which is not as reputable, by criticising it.)
- d) Make notes about how you could use this piece of evidence: what position is it taking? is it valid in taking this position? if it is not valid, what are the problems with it?
- e) Decide which position you intend to take for the essay question. (If you need help in developing a position statement, choose one from the list in the Answer Key.)
- f) Finally, decide how you will structure your ideas and the information you want to use to support them. Draw a diagram to show how you will "taxonomise" your analysis. (If you need help, look back to Unit 1B, or read the notes in the Answer Key.)

**Exercise 5**

Here are two extra pieces of evidence on the topic of tobacco, but not very relevant to the essay topic. Why aren't they relevant? What other criticisms could you make of these two pieces of evidence?

7. *In most Western countries smoking has markedly increased in the last 30 years while perinatal mortality has markedly decreased.*  
Tobacco Institute of Australia Limited, Why More Research is Needed: A Review of Recent Medical and Scientific Evidence Presented to US Congressional Committees, 8th Floor, Goldfields House, Sydney Cove, 1983, p12.
8. *Tobacco advertising bans are deplorable. Not only do they appear to be unrelated, in the short or medium term, to overall tobacco consumption, but they also tend to prevent or hamper the spreading of information about new features such as filtered and lower-tar cigarettes.*  
Boddewyn, J. [Ed] Tobacco Advertising Bans and Consumption in 16 Countries, International Advertising Association, 1986, p4.

**Exercise 6**

Over the page is an example of a student's essay on the economic effects of tobacco growth. The whole of the introduction and the conclusion have been given but there are gaps in the body of the essay. Examine the introduction and the conclusion and identify the thesis statement, or position. Then, look at the stages in the body of the essay to see how the writer is developing the argument to support the essay thesis. Now select appropriate pieces of evidence and put them in the gaps in the body of the essay to support the development of the argument. You may need to select parts of different pieces of evidence to fill the gaps. For this exercise, you can simply write in the pieces of evidence without changing them very much.

### Gap-filling exercise

There is no doubt that in many countries the tobacco industry plays a major economic role in terms of generating income and employment. However it is questionable as to whether these benefits outweigh the costs to society of tobacco use.

Tobacco use results in a number of costs to society, primarily health costs.  
(Gap a)

These costs are largely born by governments who are responsible for funding health care systems. However it is really society as a whole which contributes through tax revenue to these health care systems.

On the other hand it must also be remembered that governments themselves benefit ....  
(Gap b)

However the extent to which governments benefit must be compared to the costs of tobacco use.  
(Gap c)

It is certainly the case that tobacco production generates economic activity, employment and large revenues. Most of the world's tobacco is grown...  
(Gap d)

although (Gap e)

The distribution of the finished product supports ...  
(Gap f)

In the US, the tobacco industry employs ....  
(Gap g)

Overall, the revenues earned from the tobacco industry .....  
(Gap h)

However these revenues must be compared with .....  
(Gap i)

Therefore, in economic terms, the tobacco industry has become a financial burden to the community since it generates far greater costs which affect all members of a society through their tax support of health care systems.

# ANSWER KEY

## ESSAY MODULE

### Unit 3A

### How to use evidence:

## Developing an argument out of evidence

#### Exercise 1

Text a) is based entirely on the writer's personal experience of the world, in this case, of familiar television programs. Text b) is based on the evidence published in the academic press.

#### Exercise 2

- 1.a) This source claims that passive smoking does not necessarily hurt people.
  - 1.b) However, the source is the Tobacco Institute of Australia which has a vested interest in making this claim, and so could be biased (or not objective).
  - 1.c) Therefore, the credibility of the source is low. Nonetheless, a couple of references present evidence from academic sources which raise its overall credibility. You would need to examine other sources on passive smoking before you could assess the validity of this information.
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- 2.a) This source claims that passive smoking is harmful to the health.
  - 2.b) However, the source is a private anti-tobacco lobby group, and so could be biased.
  - 2.c) Therefore, the credibility of the source is also low, and you would need to seek out other evidence.

#### Exercise 4

- b. All the pieces of evidence are relevant to the topic.
- c. Piece 4. from the Washington Post is the least appropriate source for an academic essay. The most reputable of the other sources would be the United Nations.
- e. Some possible positions that you could take are:
  - that tobacco use is beneficial to an economy
  - that tobacco use is costly to an economy
  - that the economic benefits of tobacco use are restricted to only certain sectors or groups, for example, to tobacco companies and governments
  - that tobacco use serves to keep developing countries poor
- f. Some possible ways of setting up taxonomies to organise your ideas are:
  - sectors of the economy (supply and demand)
  - sectors of industry (primary, secondary, and tertiary)
  - areas of management by government (health, business, employment, revenue...)
  - geopolitical regions of the world (developed and developing, ...)

### Exercise 5

The piece of evidence from the Tobacco Institute of Australia is about the medical effects of tobacco use and not directly relevant. Also, it is likely to be a biased source, and presents an implicit argument which is not valid. The argument is that although smoking has increased, deaths have decreased over the last 30 years, and so therefore smoking is not bad for health. The second piece of evidence about tobacco advertising is not relevant. It also presents an invalid argument that advertising tobacco does not increase consumption. Although it may be argued that advertising does not increase **overall** consumption, it could be claimed that advertising results in increased consumption by particular groups, notably young people.

### Exercise 7 Gap-filling exercise

There is no doubt that in many countries the tobacco industry plays a major economic role in terms of generating income and employment. However it is questionable as to whether these benefits outweigh the costs to society of tobacco use. Tobacco use results in a number of costs to society, primarily health costs. **(eg. cost in lost production from sickness, health care and loss of life and property total \$27.5b.)** These costs are largely born by governments who are responsible for funding health care systems. However it is really society as a whole which contributes through tax revenue to these health care systems. On the other hand it must also be remembered that governments themselves benefit **(eg. in China, 60% goes to government)**. However the extent to which governments benefit must be compared to the costs of tobacco use. **(eg. in USA, health costs outweigh dollar returns)**. It is certainly the case that tobacco production generates economic activity, employment and large revenues. Most of the world's tobacco is grown **(by small farmers)**, although **(land used to raise tobacco is not available for food)**. The distribution of the finished product supports **(thousands of small retailers)**. In the US, the tobacco industry employs **(1.3million)**. Overall, the revenues earned from the tobacco industry **(are substantial, eg. \$19b. in USA)**. However these revenues must be compared with **(costs to society when population suffers disease)**. Therefore, in economic terms, the tobacco industry has become a financial burden to the community since it generates far greater costs which affect all members of a society through their tax support of health care systems.