

Module 9: Using Evidence in Essays

Aims of this module:

- To explain the importance of claims and evidence in a persuasive essay
- To identify appropriate evidence for an academic essay
- To provide tools to help you evaluate potential sources of evidence
- To show how to use evidence to develop your point of view and argument
- To explain how to acknowledge the sources you use

Claims and evidence

Persuasive writing is the type of writing where you argue for your point of view, interpretation or recommendations. This type of writing is made up of the building blocks of individual **claims** that you make, plus the **evidence** for each claim.

Without a claim, evidence is not persuasive, but instead is only a summary of facts or the ideas of others. Without any evidence, a claim is not persuasive, but only a subjective personal opinion.

Exercise 1

Compare the following two paragraphs and decide which is from a persuasive essay. Underline any claims and circle any evidence.

TEXT A

Dickson (1984: 12) maintains that television violence has a marked effect on the development of the child. Brown (1985: 176) says that children who watch a great deal of televised violence could be affected for many years. The Television Broadcasting Tribunal (1982: 16) recommends that we should "limit the number of hours per week of programmes showing violence during children's viewing times".

TEXT B

That television violence has a considerable effect on the development of the child is not disputed. Both Dickson (1984: 12) and Brown (1985: 176) have shown through extensive experiments that the majority of children are affected by television violence, Brown having extended the base of her research to longitudinal studies which reveal that this effect is quite long-term. In the face of such convincing evidence, the Television Broadcasting Tribunal has been compelled to act in order to reduce the impact that increased television viewing could have on children. The Tribunal has recommended (1982: 16) that the number of hours per week of violent programmes should be limited during children's viewing times. In spite of these recommendations, however, there continues to be a significant level of violence in programmes which are broadcast at prime viewing times for children.

Appropriate types of evidence

At university, it is more common to use evidence from the experience of others, from printed publications, intended for an academic audience. However, this will depend on the subject you are studying and the purpose of the essay. The table below shows two main types of evidence: personal and academic.

Where from?	personal experience others' experience	What for?	academic purposes non-academic purposes
What medium?	printed verbal	How close?	primary source secondary source tertiary source

Exercise 2

Read the following two sections from essays and decide which one uses more appropriate evidence for an essay. Give reasons for your opinion.

TEXT 1

Significant evidence of social change is found in the response to the findings and recommendations of the recent report into the separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families (HREOC, 1997). These recommendations have been supported by a broad section of the community. According to the former chairman of the Council for Reconciliation, Pat Dodson (1999), more than 350 reconciliation groups have been formed and close to one million non-indigenous people have signed the many Sorry Books across the nation. Although the present Prime Minister of Australia has not apologised for past wrongs, a number of State Premiers, including the Premier of Queensland have taken this step.

TEXT 2

An increasing number of people in the non-Aboriginal community are coming forward to support the process of reconciliation. Almost every day the media reports groups or significant individuals who have apologised for past wrongs. One recent report on the news showed the entire audience of a public meeting in Bowral standing up to apologise. In Marrickville, a teacher in a local pre-school reported that songs about Aboriginal people and their culture, recorded by the singer, Aunty Wendy are more popular with non-indigenous pre-schoolers than the Wiggles songs.

With all types of evidence, there is another important way in which they can be categorised.

(1) **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.

(2) **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.

(3) **Tertiary sources** are one step further removed again, for example, a textbook that summarises the work of many researchers.

There are different expectations about whether you should use primary, secondary or tertiary sources, depending on the individual assignment task, as well as the conventions in the subject you are studying. You may be given direct guidance by your lecturer or in assignment instructions, or indirect guidance through the type of readings on the reading list for the course. It is always a good idea to ask for clarification if you are unsure.

Evaluating potential sources of evidence

There are several factors to consider when you are deciding whether a source could be useful evidence for your essay. These factors are:

- the author's point of view or interpretation of the topic
- the reliability of the source (e.g. objectivity or bias, respected publisher or journal, up-to-date, status of the author as an expert, etc.)
- how relevant the content of the source is to the purpose of the essay, and the specific claims you want to make.

Exercise 3

Read the two sources below and answer the following questions on the next page.

- What position does each source take about the effects of passive smoking?
- Are these sources reliable?
- How relevant is the information for an essay about whether smoking should be banned near schools and playgrounds?

	Source 1	Source 2
(a) Position on the effects of passive smoking		
(b) Reliability		
(c) Relevance		

TEXT 1

Excerpt from *Sullum Jacob (1998) FOR YOUR OWN GOOD: The Anti Smoking Crusade and the Tyranny of Public Health*, Free Press, N.Y.

..... it is safe to say the hazards of second hand smoke have been grossly exaggerated. ETS is certainly an irritant. It can induce tears, headaches, coughing and nausea. It probably aggravates asthma and bronchitis, and it may increase the frequency of respiratory infections in young children.⁷⁴ On the other hand the risk for kids exposed to ETS in the home, which the Lancet calls "unquantifiable and probably tiny," is hardly enough to justify a charge of child abuse.⁷⁵

Excerpt from the reference list:

- (74) For a summary of possible effects on children, see Anne Charleton, "Children and Passive Smoking: A Review," *Journal of Family Practice*, 38:3 (March 1994)pp267 - 277; the review was funded by the British Cancer Research Campaign.
- (75) "Is Health a Moral Responsibility?" *Lancet*, 347 (May 4, 1996), p1197

TEXT 2

Excerpt from *Winstanley, M [Ed] (1995) Tobacco in Australia: Facts and Issues, (2nd Ed. p.77) Action on Smoking and Health Limited (ASH Australia), 5th Floor 64 Kippax Street, Surry Hills, Sydney.*

A wealth of scientific evidence now exists showing 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 disease, and cardiovascular disease. This is of course in addition to the well known 'irritant' effects of tobacco smoke to the eyes, nose, throat and airways passages.⁶

Excerpt from the reference list:

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

Acknowledging sources

Whenever you use evidence which comes from someone else's work, you need to acknowledge it, by including a reference. If you paraphrase the idea into new words, the reference is enough. However if you use the same words of the source, these words need to be acknowledged also, with quotation marks (or indenting, for a longer quotation). Not acknowledging either the ideas or words of someone else is plagiarism.

Exercise 4

Read the original source and student texts below. Are the ideas and words of the source properly acknowledged by the student?

SECTION FROM ORIGINAL SOURCE

Thus the task confronting the undergraduate is not one of absorbing a body of knowledge and regurgitating it, on demand, in something called 'good expression'. Rather it is one of learning how to question and how to speak like an anthropologist, sociologist or historian. It is a task of 'learning how to mean'.

Clanchy, J. (1978) Language in the University" Education News 16(4):21

SECTION FROM STUDENT'S ESSAY 1

Thus the task that the undergraduate confronts is not a matter of absorbing an amount of knowledge and regurgitating it in good expression. Instead it is a matter of learning how to speak like a sociologist or an historian, or in Clanchy's (1978:21) words, it is a task of "learning how to mean".

SECTION FROM STUDENT'S ESSAY 2

The skills of absorbing knowledge and then recalling information for examinations are not sufficient to be able to succeed at university. Clanchy (1978:21), in describing the need for students to "learn how to question and how to speak like an anthropologist...", has summed up the problem for undergraduate students as facing the "task of learning how to mean".

Quoting or paraphrasing?

Most lecturers prefer students to paraphrase sources (i.e. to write the ideas in their own words), rather than quote them. This is because paraphrasing shows that you understand the ideas. It also allows you to take only the relevant idea(s) for the claim you are making.

It is better to paraphrase when:

- the ideas are relevant, but the exact words are not necessary.

It is appropriate to quote when:

- the exact words are a necessary part of the meaning, for example, in a poem or a definition of a key concept
- the exact words are relevant to the claim you are making, for example, if you are commenting on terminology used.

Do NOT quote when:

- the quotation repeats information given in your own words.
- you do not understand the meaning of the original source.
- you do not feel capable of paraphrasing the original correctly.

Rules for quotations:

- Any quotation must be 100% accurate.
- A short quotation should be enclosed with quotation marks.

- A long quotation (3 lines or more) should be separated from the main body of your text by starting on a new line, indenting, and not using quotation marks.

Referencing conventions

There are several different ways to reference material, and these are called referencing conventions, or citation styles. Each faculty, school or department has one or more conventions that they prefer – e.g. Harvard, APA (American Psychological Association, Oxford, Chicago). Generally these fall into three basic types:

- (1) numbered references in the text e.g. [5]
+ a numbered list of references (end notes) at the end
- (2) numbered references in the text e.g. ⁵
+ numbered footnotes at the bottom of each page
- (3) references in brackets in the text e.g. (Kwong, 2007, p.14)
+ an alphabetical reference list on the last page

If you have not been advised, ask your lecturer or tutor which referencing convention you should use. The library has guides for each referencing convention, which show exactly how to set out the references inside the text and at the end.

Answers

Exercise 1

Claims are underlined and evidence is in bold.

Text B is a more persuasive text.

TEXT a

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TEXT b

That television violence has a considerable effect on the development of the child is not disputed. **Both Dickson (1984: 12) and Brown (1985: 176) have shown through extensive experiments that the majority of children are affected by television violence, Brown having extended the base of her research to longitudinal studies which reveal that this effect is quite long-term.** In the face of such convincing evidence, the Television Broadcasting Tribunal has been compelled to act in order to reduce the impact that increased television viewing could have on children. **The Tribunal has recommended (1982: 16) that the number of hours per week of violent programmes should be limited during children's viewing times.** In spite of these recommendations, however, there continues to be a significant level of violence in programmes which are broadcast at prime viewing times for children.

Exercise 2

Text 1 uses more appropriate evidence than Text 2. Text 1 refers to external sources and cites page numbers from those sources. Text 2 uses popular culture and general knowledge to support the argument.

Exercise 3

	Source 1	Source 2
(a) Position on the effects of passive smoking	Passive smoking is not as dangerous as has been implied.	Passive smoking poses serious risk of harm.
(b) Reliability	This text uses authoritative and well respected sources such as the Lancet. However, the text itself is not peer reviewed or authoritative (such as a book published by a university).	This text uses authoritative sources such as a document from the US government. However, it is published by a lobby group which has a strong viewpoint, so it may not be balanced and objective.
(c) Relevance	This text is not relevant to the essay about the effects of passive smoking near schools and playgrounds.	This text is not a good source of facts about effects of passive smoking near schools and playgrounds.
	Both texts are now more than 10 years old so more recent research and publications would be important sources for an essay.	

Exercise 4

Essay 1 has been plagiarised from the original source. There are many words that are identical to the source and they have not been placed in quotes or acknowledged as being Clanchy's ideas, not the writer's ideas.

Essay 2 has been reworded and does not plagiarise the original passage. The section in quotes is referenced correctly.