

USING EVIDENCE IN AN ACADEMIC ESSAY

When writing an argumentative, analytical, or persuasive essay, prove your argument by including evidence. What counts as “evidence” depends on the genre, discipline, and assignment, but most commonly evidence in academic papers comes in the form of quotations, paraphrases, and real-life examples. In this handout, we will focus on quotations. All evidence should be clear and relevant both to your paragraph’s argument and to your overall thesis statement.

To use evidence clearly and effectively within a paragraph, you can follow this simple three-step process: 1) introduce the evidence, 2) state the evidence, and 3) explain the main message you are emphasizing through the evidence. To create a complete, rich paragraph, you should also begin with a claim and end with a link to the thesis statement.

Before the Evidence: Making a Claim

First, make an assertion. Ideally, the paragraph’s topic sentence will assert a claim.

Example: Adolph Hitler’s writings reinforce the belief that there is no objective reality; instead, a person creates his or her own reality.

Introducing the Evidence

Never drop in a quotation or other evidence without introducing it first. Instead, include a sentence or phrase that prepares the reader for the evidence. Some common introductory phrases include According to <author>, According to <source>, <Author> states, <Author> writes, <Author> concludes, <Author> attests, and so on.

Example: In *Mein Kampf*, Hitler asserts,

Stating the Evidence

Next, state your evidence. If your evidence is a quotation, carefully copy the quote word for word from the source and place it within quotation marks. If your evidence is a paraphrase or anecdote, stating it might take up more space; state the paraphrase or anecdote as clearly and succinctly as possible.

Example: “If you tell a big enough lie and tell it often enough, it will be believed.”

Explaining the Evidence

Immediately after you state the evidence, explain the underlying message or main idea you, as the writer, are trying to emphasize to the audience.

This step can be very challenging! To find ideas about how to explain your evidence, ask yourself the following questions:

- In what ways does this evidence support your assertion? Explain the strongest points you can think of.
- How does the evidence relate to the original author’s main idea?
- Is there anything about the original author’s main idea that can be applied to your assertion?
- Is there anything about this quote or example that wouldn’t be obvious to all readers? Is there anything unique or confusing about it? Draw the reader’s attention to those parts.

Tip: It’s okay if you feel you are explaining something that seems self-evident from the example. Remember, not everyone thinks the same as you! It is better to overemphasize than to under-explain.

Example: By describing the lie as “big,” Hitler emphasizes that determination and perseverance can help a person accomplish even unrealistic goals. In his mind, objective reality has no importance; instead, what matters is what people believe—no matter how big the lie.

After the Evidence: Linking to Your Thesis Statement

To make your essay coherent, each new idea should relate to the overall idea of the essay. After you explain evidence, you should also show how it relates to your essay’s thesis statement.

Example (for a paper whose main idea is that reality is socially constructed): Sometimes creating one’s own reality means creating a reality for others as well, as Hitler illustrates. Because we are susceptible to believing repeated lies, each individual’s reality is dependent on others.

Example of the Final Product

Adolph Hitler’s writings reinforce the belief that there is no objective reality; instead, a person creates his or her own reality. In *Mein Kampf*, Hitler asserts, “If you tell a big enough lie and tell it often enough, it will be believed.” By describing the lie as “big,” Hitler emphasizes that determination and perseverance can help a person accomplish even unrealistic goals. In his mind, objective reality has no importance; instead, what matters is what people believe—no matter how big the lie. Sometimes creating one’s own reality means creating a reality for others as well, as Hitler illustrates. Because we are susceptible to believing repeated lies, each individual’s reality is dependent on others.