



Rules of Evidence

From the desk of . . .
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The Importance of Evidence

If you're saving the phrase "vital skill" for the right time, this is it. Few skills are more basic to your success in college than the ability to develop an idea fully in writing. Regardless of your discipline—nursing, physical therapy, business, English, psychology, or landscape management—your success in college and as a professional will depend upon your ability to think through an issue, arrive at a conclusion, and be able to support it with adequate evidence.

What is Evidence?

No secrets here: evidence is support for your points/opinions. In its most basic form, this support or evidence is usually broken down into:

- Facts
- Examples
- Statistics
- Expert opinion/testimony
- Narrative of experiences

This evidence can be come from your own pre-knowledge or from evidence gathering. If it is information, opinion or the words of someone else, you should give credit for that borrowing. Doing so is another way of enhancing your authority as a writer and strengthening your point.

Almost all paragraphs or paragraph sections in nonfiction writing include a sentence that states the main idea. We've called it the *topic sentence*. It is this main idea that needs to be supported by evidence.

Examples of Examples

You probably already have a pretty clear understanding of each of the five types of support simply based upon their names and your past experience. To examine them more closely, let's say that your topic sentence is: "People normally unconcerned about the environment can be motivated to action if they feel personally affected." Clearly, this topic calls for ways to get people personally involved. Here are just some of the ways you could support that topic sentence/main idea:

■ **Reasons** why people should become involved in an environmental initiative or action: the health of their family could be in danger; the value of their home/property could be lowered or wiped out; their officials could be deceiving them.

- **Examples** of neighborhood a recycling effort succeeding in communities once plagued by trash-disposal problems. Examples can be short, long, real or imaginary.
- **Facts** about residents' efforts to preserve the quality of well water in a community undergoing widespread industrial development.
- **Details** about the specific steps the average person can take to get involved in environmental issues.
- **Statistics** showing the growing number of Americans concerned about the environment.
- **Personal experience** telling about the way you (the author) became involved in an effort to stop a local business from dumping waste into a neighborhood stream.
- **Anecdote** about an ordinarily apathetic personal who protested the commercial development of a wooded area where he jogs and ride bikes.
- **Quotation/paraphrase** from a well-known scientist about the considerable impact that well-organized, well-informed citizens can have on environmental legislation.

Rhetorical Patterns

These methods of organizing information can also help you generate support for your paragraphs. Use them during the prewriting stage as you prepare to outline your paragraphs. Thesis: *Babysitters should be required to complete a course in child care to ensure they have the skills to keep children safe.*

<u>Pattern of Development</u>	<u>Evidence Generated</u>
Description	Details about a child who, while being babysat, was badly hurt in a high chair while the babysitter was out of the room for 20 minutes.
Narration	Story about the time a friend babysat a child who became seriously ill and whose condition was made worse by the babysitter's actions.
Exemplification	Examples of potential babysitting problems: an infant who rolls off a changing table; a toddler who sticks objects into an electrical outlet; a child who is bitten by a neighborhood dog.
Division	A typical babysitting evening divided into stages: playing with the kids; putting them to bed; dealing with their fears and demands once they're in bed.
Classification	Classify kids' nighttime fears: of monsters under their beds of bad dreams; of being abandoned by their parents.
Process Analysis	Step-by-step account of what a babysitter should do if a child becomes ill or injured.
Comparison/contrast	Contrast between two babysitters: one well-prepared and the other unprepared.
Cause/effect	Why children have temper tantrums; the effect of such tantrums on an unskilled babysitter.
Definition	What is meant by a skilled babysitter?
Proposal	A proposal for a babysitting training program to be offered by a local organization.

How to Evaluate Your Support/Evidence

Please use the following criteria to determine if your evidence/support will be sufficient for your writing:

► **The Evidence is Adequate.** Few people will automatically accept your ideas or opinions on their face value. This is especially true of teachers and bosses. You must have enough evidence to be convincing.

► **The Evidence is Relevant/Unified.** This is perhaps the most common problem: great material but not really related to the main point. Sometimes called “drifting off the point.” For example, let’s say this is your point: *“Starting your own business takes a lot of planning and hard work.”* Which of the following statements are relevant or irrelevant:

- Prospective business owners must create a business plan to borrow money from a bank.
- Owning your own business is rewarding.
- People should research the various trends in their market for the type of business they plan to operate.
- Sometimes business owners can get their families to help for free.
- People should determine how much money they will spend and how much they will make in order to determine possible profit and losses.

Another example: *“To maintain a long distance relationship, both people must be willing to sacrifice.”*

- Separations often occur when couples attend different colleges after high school.
- Both parties must be sensitive to the other’s needs, even at a distance.
- People have to communicate often with each other, even if it is difficult to find the time.
- Both must put an extra effort into the relationship if it is to work.
- My parents had a long-distance relationship for years and it obviously worked – here I am.

► **The Evidence is Specific/Dramatic.** When your materials are vague and general, your ideas and opinions will not be as convincing as they could be. Let’s say your thesis is that “all college students should experience part-time work because of unique learning experiences on the job.” You can’t just say that “you’ll learn a lot about yourself, your self-esteem will be enhanced.”

Let’s say that you refer to your own experience when these things happened. Not enough! You must describe how you started out as a sarcastic, self-centered brat who learned to respect others and to be part of a team. You must describe how it all came to a head one night in a confrontation with a customer and your co-workers. You must show the anger, let the reader smell the onions, put the reader in the middle of the action.

► **The Evidence is Documented.** If your evidence is from outside sources, you acknowledge them by using one of the many citation formats: MLA, APA, CBE and more.

Good Links for Paragraph Skills

http://www2.actden.com/writ_den/tips/paragrap/
<http://slc.otago.ac.nz/studyskills/ch4sect7.asp>

<http://humanities.ucsd.edu/writing/workshop/paragraphs.htm>
<http://www.wlu.ca/writing/handouts/paragraph1.htm>