

Supporting the Thesis with Evidence



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After identifying a preliminary thesis, you should develop the evidence needed to support that central idea. This supporting material grounds your essay, showing readers you have good reason for feeling as you do about your subject. Your evidence also adds interest and color to your writing.

In college essays of 500 to 1,500 words, you usually need at least three major points of evidence to develop your thesis. These major points—each focusing on related but separate aspects of the thesis—eventually become the supporting paragraphs (see pages 66–78) in the body of the essay.

WHAT IS EVIDENCE?

By **evidence**, we mean a number of different kinds of support. *Reasons* are just one option. To develop your thesis, you might also include *examples, facts, details, statistics, personal observation or experience, anecdotes, and expert opinions and quotations* (gathered from books, articles, interviews, documentaries, and the like). Imagine you're writing an essay with the thesis, "People normally unconcerned

about the environment can be galvanized to constructive action if they feel personally affected by an environmental problem.” You could support this thesis with any combination of the following types of evidence:



- *Reasons* why people become involved in the environmental movement: they believe the situation endangers the health of their families; they fear the value of their homes will plummet; they feel deceived by officials’ assurances that there’s nothing to worry about.
- *Examples* of neighborhood recycling efforts succeeding in communities once plagued by trash-disposal problems.
- *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.
- *A personal experience* telling about the way you became involved in an effort to stop a local business from dumping waste into a neighborhood stream.
- *An anecdote* about an ordinarily apathetic friend who protested the commercial development of a wooded area where he jogs.
- *A quotation* from a well-known scientist about the considerable impact that well-organized, well-informed citizens can have on environmental legislation.

HOW DO YOU FIND EVIDENCE?

Where do you find the examples, anecdotes, details, and other types of evidence needed to support your thesis? As you saw when you followed Harriet Davids’s strategies for gathering material for an essay (pages 24–33), a good deal of information is generated during the prewriting stage. In this phase of the writing process, you tap into your personal experiences, draw upon other people’s observations, perhaps interview a person with special knowledge about your subject. The library and the Internet, with their abundant material, are another rich source of supporting evidence. (For information on using the library and the Internet, see Chapter 19.) In addition, the various patterns of development are a valuable source of evidence. (See Figure 4.1 on page 48).

How the Patterns of Development Help Generate Evidence



In Chapter 2, we discussed how the patterns of development could help generate material about Harriet Davids’s limited subject (pages 29–30). The same patterns also help develop support for a thesis. The chart on page 47

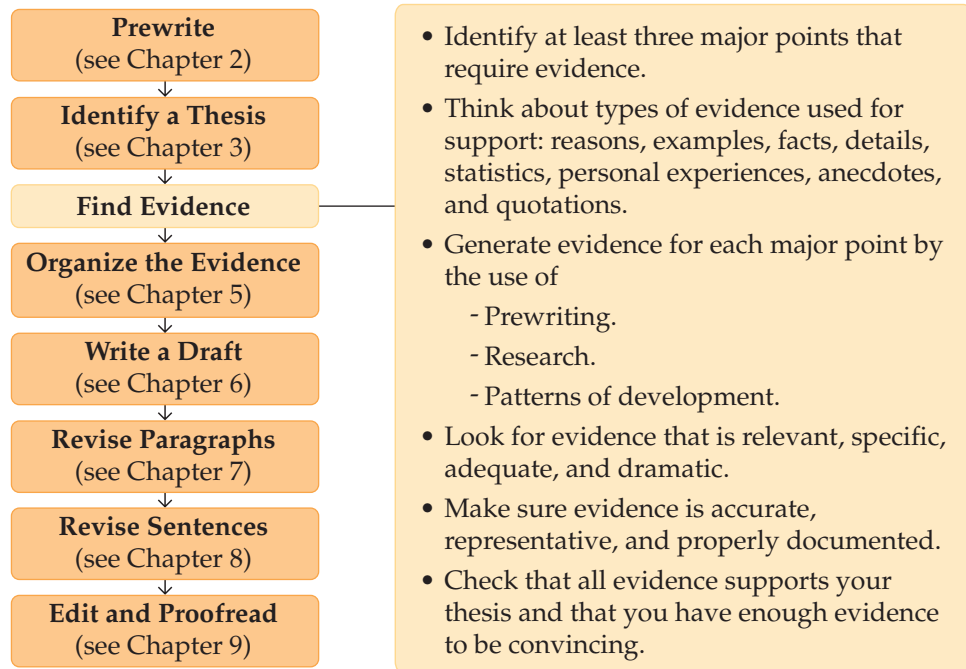
Pattern of Development	Evidence Generated
Description	Details about a child who, while being babysat, was badly hurt playing on a backyard swing.
Narration	Story about the time a friend babysat a child who became seriously ill and whose condition was worsened by the babysitter's remedies.
Illustration	Examples of potential babysitting problems: an infant who rolls off a changing table; a toddler who sticks objects into an electric outlet; a school-age child who is bitten by a neighborhood dog.
Division-classification	A typical babysitting evening divided into stages: playing with the kids; putting them to bed; dealing with their nighttime fears once they're in bed. 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.
Pattern of Development	Evidence Generated.
Comparison-contrast	Contrast between two babysitters: one well-prepared, 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 <i>skilled</i> babysitter?
Argumentation-persuasion	A proposal for a babysitting training program to be offered by the local community center.

shows how they generate evidence for this thesis: "To those who haven't done it, babysitting looks easy. In practice, though, babysitting can be difficult, frightening, even dangerous." (For further discussion of ways to use the patterns of development in different phases of the writing process, see pages 29–30, 39, 55 and 69–70.)

CHARACTERISTICS OF EVIDENCE

No matter how it is generated, all types of supporting evidence share the characteristics described in the following sections. You should keep these characteristics in mind as you review your thesis and scratch list. That way, you can make the changes needed to strengthen the evidence gathered earlier. As you'll see shortly, Harriet Davids focused on many of these issues as she worked with the evidence she collected during the prewriting phase.

FIGURE 4.1
Process Diagram: Finding Evidence



The Evidence Is Relevant and Unified

All the evidence in an essay must clearly support the thesis. It makes no difference how riveting material might be; if it doesn't *relate directly* to the essay's central point, the evidence should be eliminated. Irrelevant material can weaken your position by implying that no relevant support exists. It also distracts readers from your controlling idea, thus disrupting the paper's overall unity.

Suppose you want to write an essay with the thesis, "Fairly fought arguments can strengthen relationships." To support your thesis, you could adapt prewriting material about an argument you had with a friend: how the disagreement started, how you and your friend worked out your differences, how your friendship deepened because of what you learned about each other. Also to the point would be statements from your sister who found, after reading a book on conflict management, that her relationship with her co-workers improved significantly. Similarly relevant would be an account of a conflict-ridden family whose tensions eased once a counselor taught them how to air their differences. It would *not* serve your thesis, however, to include details about the way negotiating strategies can backfire. This material wouldn't be appropriate because it contradicts the point you want to make.

Early in the writing process, Harriet Davids was aware of the importance of relevant evidence. Take a moment to review Harriet’s annotated prewriting (page 32). Even though Harriet hadn’t yet identified her thesis, she realized she should delete a number of items on the reshaped version of her brainstormed list—for example, “prices of everything outrageous . . .” and “Not enough homework assigned—kids unprepared.” Harriet eliminated these points because they weren’t consistent with the focus of her limited subject.



The Evidence Is Specific

When evidence is vague and general, readers lose interest in what you’re saying, become skeptical of your ideas’ validity, and feel puzzled about your meaning. In contrast, *specific, concrete evidence* provides sharp *word pictures* that engage your readers, persuade them that your thinking is sound, and clarify meaning.

Consider a paper with this thesis: “College students should not automatically dismiss working in fast-food restaurants; such jobs can provide valuable learning experiences.” Here’s how you might go wrong trying to support the thesis: Suppose you begin with the broad claim that these admittedly lackluster jobs can teach students a good deal about themselves. In a similarly abstract fashion, you go on to say that such jobs can affect students’ self-concepts in positive ways. You end by declaring that such changes in self-perception lead to greater maturity.

To prevent readers from thinking “Who cares?” or “Who says?” you need to replace these vague generalities with specific, concrete evidence. For example, focusing on your own experience working at a fast-food restaurant, you might start by describing how you learned to control your sarcasm; such an attitude, you discovered, alienated co-workers and almost caused your boss to fire you. You could also recount the time you administered the Heimlich maneuver to a choking customer; your quick thinking and failure to panic increased your self-esteem. Finally, you could explain that the job encouraged you to question some of your values; you became close friends with a bookish, introspective co-worker—the kind of person you used to spurn. This specific, particularized evidence would support your thesis and help readers “see” the point you’re making. (Pages 71–73 describe strategies for making evidence specific.)

At this point, it will be helpful to look once again at the annotations that Harriet Davids entered on her prewriting material (page 32). Note the way she jotted down new details to make her prewriting more specific. For instance, to the item, “Distractions from homework,” she added the example “malls.” And once Harriet arrived at her thesis (“Being a parent today is much more difficult than it was a generation ago”), she realized that she needed to provide even more specifics. With her thesis firmly in mind, she expanded her prewriting material—for instance, the point about sexuality on television. To develop that item, she specified three kinds of TV programming that depict sexuality offensively: soap operas, R-rated comedians, R-rated cable movies. And, as you’ll soon discover, Harriet added many more specific details when she prepared her final outline (pages 60–61) and her first and final drafts (pages 86–87 and 144–145).



The Evidence Is Adequate

Readers won't automatically accept your thesis; you need to provide *enough specific evidence* to support your viewpoint. On occasion, a single extended example will suffice. Generally, though, you'll need a variety of evidence: facts, examples, reasons, personal observations, expert opinion, and so on.

Assume you want to write an essay arguing that "college students living on campus should register and vote where they attend school." Hoping the essay will be published in the campus newspaper, you write it in the form of an open letter to the student body. One reason in support of your thesis strikes you immediately: that eighteen-year-olds should act as the adults they are and become involved in the electoral process. You also present as evidence a description of how good you felt during the last election when you walked into the voting booth set up in the student center. If this is all the support you provide, students probably won't be convinced; you haven't offered *sufficient* evidence. You need to present additional material—statistics on the shockingly low number of students registered to vote at your school; an account of a voter-registration drive at a nearby university that got students involved in the community and thus reduced traditional "town-gown" tensions; quotations from several students who voted against an anti-student housing ordinance and saw the ordinance defeated; an explanation of how easy it is to register.



Now take a final look at Harriet's annotations on her prewriting (page 32). As you can see, Harriet realized she needed more than one block of supporting material to develop her limited subject; that's why she identified four separate blocks of evidence (day care, homework distractions, sexual material, and dangers). As soon as Harriet formulated her thesis, she reexamined her prewriting to see if it provided sufficient support for her essay's central point. Luckily, Harriet recognized that these four blocks of evidence needed to be developed further. She thus decided to enlarge the "Distractions from homework" block by drawing upon her daughters' love affair with the Internet and the "Life-threatening dangers" block by including details about the way peer pressure to experiment with drugs and alcohol endangers young people. Harriet's final outline (pages 60–61) reflects these decisions. When you look at the outline, you'll also note that Harriet ended up eliminating one of the four blocks of evidence ("Day care") she had identified earlier. But she added so many specific and dramatic details when writing her first and final drafts (pages 86–87 and 144–145) that her evidence was more than sufficient.

Continues
on
page 60

The Evidence Is Dramatic

The most effective evidence enlarges the reader's experience by *dramatizing reality*. Say you plan to write an essay with the thesis, "People who affirm the value of life refuse to wear fur coats." If, as support, you state only that most animals killed for their fur are caught in leg-hold traps, your readers will have little sense of the suffering involved. But if you write that steel-jaw, leg-hold traps snap shut on an animal's limb, crushing tissue and bone and leaving the



animal to die, in severe pain, from exposure or starvation, your readers can better envision the animal's plight.

The Evidence Is Accurate

Make your evidence as dramatic as you can, but be sure it is *accurate*. When you have a strong belief and want readers to see things your way, you may be tempted to overstate or downplay facts, disregard information, misquote, or make up details. Suppose you plan to write an essay making the point that dormitory security is lax. You begin supporting your thesis by narrating the time you were nearly mugged in your dorm hallway. Realizing the essay would be more persuasive if you also mentioned other episodes, you decide to invent some material. Perhaps you describe several supposed burglaries on your dorm floor or exaggerate the amount of time it took campus security to respond to an emergency call from a residence hall. Yes, you've supported your point—but at the expense of truth.

The Evidence Is Representative

Using *representative* evidence means that you rely on the *typical*, the *usual*, to show that your point is valid. Contrary to the maxim, exceptions don't prove the rule. Perhaps you plan to write an essay contending that the value of seat belts has been exaggerated. To support your position, you mention a friend who survived a head-on collision without wearing a seat belt. Such an example isn't representative because the facts and figures on accidents suggest your friend's survival was a fluke.



Borrowed Evidence Is Documented

If you include evidence from outside sources (books, articles, interviews), you need to *acknowledge* where that information comes from. If you don't, readers may consider your evidence nothing more than your point of view, or they may regard as dishonest your failure to cite your indebtedness to others for ideas that obviously aren't your own.

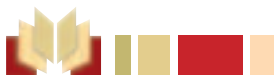
The rules for crediting sources in informal writing are less established than they are for formal research. Follow any guidelines your instructor provides, and try to keep your notations, like those that follow, as simple as possible.

Business Life (March 16, 2005) reports that corporate wrongdoing has led to a rash of consumer protests.

Science writer Natalie Angier believes that private zoos may be the only hope for some endangered species.

In formal research, you need to provide much more detailed documentation of sources. For information on formal documentation, see Chapter 20.

Strong supporting evidence is at the heart of effective writing. Without it, essays lack energy and fail to project the writer's voice and perspective. Such lifeless writing is also more apt to put readers to sleep than to engage their interest and convince them that the points being made are valid. Taking the time to accumulate solid supporting material is, then, a critical step in the writing process. (If you'd like to read more about the characteristics of strong evidence, see pages 71–74. If you'd like suggestions for organizing an essay's evidence, see the diagram on page 85.)



ACTIVITIES: SUPPORTING THE THESIS WITH EVIDENCE

1. Imagine you're writing an essay with the following thesis in mind. Which of the statements in the list support the thesis? Label each statement acceptable (OK), irrelevant (IR), inaccurate (IA), or too general (TG).

Thesis: Colleges should put less emphasis on sports.

- a. High-powered athletic programs can encourage grade fixing.
 - b. Too much value is attached to college sports.
 - c. Athletics have no educational value.
 - d. Competitive athletics can lead to extensive and expensive injuries.
 - e. Athletes can spend too much time on the field and not enough on their studies.
 - f. Good athletic programs create a strong following among former undergraduates.
2. For each of the following thesis statements, list at least three supporting points that convey vivid word pictures.
 - a. Rude behavior in movie theaters seems to be on the rise.
 - b. Recent television commercials portray men as incompetent creatures.
 - c. The local library fails to meet the public's needs.
 - d. People often abuse public parks.
 3. Turn back to the paragraphs you prepared in response to activity 2, activity 3, or activity 5 in Chapter 3 (pages 43 and 44). Select one paragraph and strengthen its evidence, using the guidelines presented in this chapter.
 4. Choose one of the following thesis statements. Then identify an appropriate purpose, audience, tone, and point of view for an essay with this thesis. Using freewriting, mapping, or the questioning technique, generate at least three supporting points for the thesis. Last, write a paragraph about one of the points, making sure your evidence reflects the characteristics discussed in this chapter. Alternatively, you may go ahead and prepare the first draft of an

essay having the selected thesis. (If you choose the second option, you may want to turn to page 85 to see a diagram showing how to organize a first draft.) Save whatever you prepare so you can work with it further after reading the next chapter.

- a. Winning the lottery may not always be a blessing.
 - b. All of us can take steps to reduce the country's trash crisis.
 - c. Drug education programs in public schools are (or are not) effective.
5. Select one of the following thesis statements. Then determine your purpose, audience, tone, and point of view for an essay with this thesis. Next, use the patterns of development to generate at least three supporting points for the thesis. Finally, write a paragraph about one of the points, making sure that your evidence demonstrates the characteristics discussed in this chapter. Alternatively, you may go ahead and prepare a first draft of an essay having the thesis selected. (If you choose the latter option, you may want to turn to page 85 to see a diagram showing how to organize a first draft.) Save whatever you prepare so you can work with it further after reading the next chapter.
- a. Teenagers should (or should not) be able to obtain birth-control devices without their parents' permission.
 - b. The college's system for awarding student loans needs to be overhauled.
 - c. E-mail has changed for the worse (or the better) the way Americans communicate with each other.
6. Look at the thesis and refined scratch outline you prepared in response to activity 7 in Chapter 3 (page 44). Where do you see gaps in the support for your thesis? By brainstorming with others, generate material to fill these gaps. If some of the new points generated suggest that you should modify your thesis, make the appropriate changes now. (Save this material so you can work with it further after reading the next chapter.)

(For more activities on generating evidence, see pages 89–93 in Chapter 6 as well as pages 135–138 in Chapter 8.)

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