

What Makes a Good Argument?

There are lots of ways of getting an audience to listen to you, even to agree that you might have a point, whether or not they think you're right, but getting them to believe you—to accept that what you are saying is irrefutably true, rather than just interesting or informative—takes arguments that are proved and based on evidence rather than on assertions.

CONTENT

A formal argument comprises three elements: evidence, warrants, and claims. As we saw in Chapter 1, we could view an argument as a pyramid, with a solid basis of evidence—statements your listeners accept as true—supporting a more general statement about social activity (the warrant). On top of the pyramid is the claim, the contention you want your audience to accept.

Evidence

Evidence has as many definitions and descriptions as there are ways of challenging it and testing it. For our purposes, focusing on the intent and target of the evidence—the audience—is more useful than precisely defining the term. The debater's goal in using evidence is to lay a foundation for an argument in the listener's mind. To that end, evidence is anything that your audience will accept as being a true and accurate statement of the way the world, or some aspect of it, currently exists.

There's a depressing tendency to assume that evidence needs to consist exclusively of a litany of numbers, statistics patiently garnered from the desiccated bowels of government agencies or survey data laboriously mined in some long-forgotten seam of academia. Certainly information of this type has its place and provides valuable ammunition for both building your own case and destroying that of the opposing side. However, plenty of other forms of evidence are available. For example, a situation or event that the audience knows well works just fine and often can be more persuasive than a dry statistical recitation.

Your statement of the world as it is may be a very simple one: "The World Food Program stated in a report last year that if the rains in (*country X*) were to fail again, the resulting famine would be the worst for half a century. There was no rain this year." Simple statements such as this can often carry far more force than detailed extrapolations of the exact definitions of poverty or hunger or famine. You have a statement of the world as it is that your audience is likely to accept as being true—an additional benefit is its simplicity: it is