

Evidence

Much of what is considered to be “evidence” is of very little help to the debater, who is as unlikely to be expected to produce the blood-smeared knife as she is a mathematical formula or a test tube. Equally, as this chapter shows, some types of evidence are considered persuasive in one context but not in others. Perhaps most important within a debate setting, the speaker cannot present a “fact” with a flourish and a simple “Ta-da! I win, you lose.”—at least it’s very rare. Instead, evidence needs to fulfill a function; it forms part of an argument rather than being an argument in its own right. This chapter reviews what sorts of evidence work, what doesn’t, and how to tell the difference.

What Is Evidence?

Evidence is the foundation on which we build an argument. It should provide the grounding for the claim you make about how the world is now. From the point of view of the debater, evidence is anything your audience will accept as being true. So, you might start off with the statement “people prefer freedom to tyranny” and then offer evidence to support that position. The other components of your argument—your warrant and claim—will depend on the evidence you give at this critical stage. Of course, your audience may accept your assertion even without the evidence (or in spite of it), but, generally speaking, both you and they should be swayed primarily by the available evidence. As we shall see, evidence comes in various forms, many of which may be open to challenge, but the critical point is that your audience must believe it to be true. Whether you are using evidence to explain your point or to illustrate it, the more reliable the evidence, the more force your argument will carry.

Evidence can be broadly divided into four types:

- facts