

Evaluating Standards of Evidence

What, then, will determine whether your audience thinks your evidence is believable? Not how many times you say it or how assured you sound (although the latter helps). Believability is based on four criteria. Strong and persuasive evidence will generally be:

1. *Relevant*. Evidence should relate to the issue at hand, agree with your side of the debate, and fit into your argument. It's always tempting to show the audience how much you know about the subject and recite all the evidence you have. One well-chosen fact or idea is far more effective than a thousand random ones and, conveniently, takes a lot less time to say.

It may seem obvious, but it's also important to check whether the evidence you're using pertains to the situation. Data that is very old or about another country will be less persuasive than up-to-date and geographically appropriate information. Whenever possible, use evidence that is set in the country you are discussing and that is no more than five years old—assuming that a complete change hasn't occurred, for example, a revolution. Ideally, the evidence should be current and specifically about the particular situation you are debating—but we don't always get what we want.

It's also important to have a sense of scale. In a debate on compulsory homework in high school, you may be tempted to give examples of how forced labor around the world has led to revolutions and the overthrow of tyrannical regimes, but the audience could be forgiven for thinking that you have lost a sense of proportion—and, quite possibly, your grasp on reality.

2. *Comprehensible*. Debate takes place in a forum where you can assume your listener is intelligent but is unlikely to be a subject specialist (the same is also true, of course, of the debaters speaking). If you take the closest available professional model, the selection of experts who talk on National Public Television or in the media more generally, you will notice that most of them deliberately avoid long, technical terms or jargon and endless reams of statistics or obscure references to distant events or complex equations. Why? Because their goal is to be understood by the audience, not to impress everyone with how much they know. You may very well be the greatest statistician or ethicist ever born, but if the audience doesn't understand the evidence, it doesn't really matter.

This doesn't mean that you should address the audience as though they were dim, but, rather, that you should present evidence clearly and concisely and in a manner that you would expect a reasonably intelligent person to understand.