

evidence consistent with the theoretical position with which the study began. In this particular case, the study suggested that the execution of murderers is irrelevant to the overall murder rate.

Thus, a few examples of what we call “facts” include examples and illustrations, historical descriptions, statistics and parameters, and descriptions of empirical studies. These kinds of factual evidence, used well, can prove persuasive in debate. Sometimes a collection of facts is gathered together into a complex but coherent interpretation—a theory. The next category of evidence examines this idea of theory.

THEORY

In scientific circles theories are more important, more informative, and more powerful than “mere” facts. Theories offer explanations or predictions—they are statements that have explanatory or predictive power. Some theories are very formalized statements that seek to predict phenomena with great precision. Other theories are simply attempts to explain relationships that, without the theory, might not be recognized.

Scientists use formal theories like Albert Einstein’s general and specific theories of relativity or Charles Darwin’s theory of evolution to make predictions and explain phenomena. But theories need not be that formal to be useful as evidence in argumentation and debate.

The theory of mutually assured destruction (MAD) was the basis of much of U.S. foreign policy from the 1960s through the 1980s. MAD predicted that neither the Soviet Union nor the United States would ever launch a nuclear attack on the other because the leaders of each nation knew that the other would quickly respond in kind. The result of such an attack would be the nearly total destruction of both societies. The theory held that knowing these results, neither side would attack the other because of the futility of such a global encounter. The Nuclear Age Peace Foundation described MAD like this: “Whoever shoots first, dies second.”¹⁰ The MAD theory was the foundation of numerous arguments about nuclear strategy. The following diagram illustrates how the MAD theory could have been used as evidence for a claim that the Soviet Union would never launch a nuclear attack against the United States:

