

Policy- Good Vs. Bad Evidence

“Where does evidence come from? Shockingly, it doesn’t come from the evidence stork, it doesn’t come from the evidence factory. There’s no big secret to producing evidence – it’s a process that literally anyone can learn. All you need is practice.”

- Adam Symonds, Debate Coach, Arizona State University

When I was a freshman, I remember being completely lost because I did not know how to cut evidence. Even worse, I did not know where to find evidence. This was highly detrimental to my development as a debater - being able to procure and cut evidence is critical to your understanding of the arguments you run.

What is evidence?

Evidence consists of an excerpt of any published work that you present in order to support an argument.

Mind-bogglingly simple, isn’t it? Evidence can be a news article you cut from the New York Times. Evidence can be a section of a peer-reviewed paper found in a law periodical. Evidence can even come from Joe Schmoe’s random blog. If you can find an externally sourced (i.e. you didn’t write it) work that is available in any written media format, it theoretically constitutes evidence.

Joe Schmoe’s blog, however, leads me to my next point:

What is bad evidence?

No, just because you can find a published work that says something you like does not mean you should automatically use it. Bad evidence

does exist and you need to be able to avoid it by engaging in the process of quality control. Here are some things you should always avoid when searching for cards:

- Unqualified authors: this is probably the number one source of bad cards you should look to avoid. Joe Schmoe might say some pretty cool things, but if he has no relevant field experience or journalistic credentials, it's probably best to avoid him. You should also avoid using anonymous sources for the same reason, unless they publish under the umbrella of a larger (relevant) organization, such as a think tank.

- Blogs/forums/comments sections: this ties in with the above. The vast majority of blogs and public discussion forums do not make for good evidence simply because they are written by common people with little to no expertise on the subject they write about - in today's virtual age, literally anyone with computer access can start up their own blog and start firing uneducated opinions away. There are some exceptions, of course - blogs written by topical experts on a specific subject are certainly a good source of evidence.

- Poorly-warranted evidence: basically, you should not use evidence that contains many claims but does not back those claims up with reasoning. An article that asserts that the world will end in 2012 but fails to offer any warrants to support that statement probably will not win many debates. Preemptively avoiding such materials in your initial search for evidence allows you avoid using bad cards.

What is good evidence?

Simply put, good evidence is well-written, highly-warranted material found in legitimate publications by qualified authors.

- Well-written: the material is understandable, fluidly conveyed and avoids the use of field-specific jargon.
- Highly-warranted: the material does not stop at making claims, but goes on to isolate specific reasoning and analysis that supports those claims.
- Legitimate publications: ranked in terms of quality, these include books, peer-reviewed scholarly journals, government documents, online journals, major newspapers and media outlets, expert-written blogs.

Where can I find good evidence?

Well, now that we know that legitimate publications contain good evidence, let's focus on how we can narrow down our search to find such publications.

Starting at the broadest levels of the hierarchy, you can generally divide publications into two categories - print and digital. We no longer live in an age where debaters go into libraries and transcribe excerpts from books onto 3x5 index cards. Limiting yourself exclusively to scanning books and cutting/pasting the pages is rather foolish. There will be many instances in which this is appropriate, but it is important to broaden your horizons.

The Internet is the number one source of evidence, period. The availability, accessibility, and convenience of the digital medium has

made it easier than ever before to obtain and compile evidence than ever before.

Google is almost always the first place you should be heading to when searching for evidence. Some tips:

- When using Google, you should try to narrow down your searches by using specific keywords and specifying certain date ranges.
- You can also increase the number of high quality sources by using the Google Scholar function, thereby automatically eliminating the chaff.
- Similarly, searching Google Books will allow you limited access to print publications; since you can't copy or paste text, take screenshots and then paste those screenshots to a word document.
- If you are looking for disadvantage uniqueness, Google News is a fantastic news aggregator and can yield thousands of articles on any given topic in current events. You can also set up Google News Alerts for specific topics; doing so will have Google automatically email you with new articles and updates on specific keywords, which is very handy for hassle-free disad updates.
- Another good tip is to search by file type - narrowing your searches to .doc and .pdf is a good idea as they tend to bring up a lot of well-warranted reports from various organizations.

Besides Google, you should try and search any online periodicals and databases that you might have available to you. Ask your school librarian and see if you have access to any, and be sure to take note of them. Also, find a nearby college or university and see if they offer

public access to their print and online materials. Often times such institutions will do this in some limited form or another, and it is an extremely valuable way to broaden the number of publications available to you.

If you don't have any luck finding access to databases, the next best thing is to find an alumnus of your program who can provide access for you. I do this for my old high school - as a UCLA student, I have access to a mind-boggling number of periodicals as well as (literally) millions of volumes available in the University of California system. From time to time my old debaters will send me requests for subscription-based online articles and journals, and I am only too happy to download them for free and send them their way.

Databases and periodicals rock because they contain very high-quality evidence. Articles tend to be scholarly and peer-reviewed in nature and are written by experts in their fields. Needless to say, it is advantageous to have such resources at your disposal.

That should provide a fairly good idea of where you need to begin when researching the topic for evidence. Remember, the goal is to aim for procuring quality, well-warranted digital materials. If you have any further questions, be sure to post a comment on this page. Good luck!