Chapter 9: Assembling Reasons and Evidence

1. To start a storyboard, write your main claim and each reason (and subreason) at the top of separate cards or pages. Then below each reason (or subreason), list the evidence that supports it. If you don't have it yet, note the kind of evidence you'll need.
2. Once you've arranged your reasons in a plausible order, be sure you have su;cient evidence to support each one. Readers will not accept a reason until they see it anchored in what they consider to be a bedrock of established fact.
3. But a skeptical reader might ask, That's just a generalization. What hard numbers do you have to back up "increased in frequency and intensity"? How many schools do you have solid data on? And what do you mean by "big," "party," and "small"? Such a reader treats that statement not as an unquestioned fact but as a soft reason still in need of hard evidence.
4. If she found her data in a secondary source, she could cite it and reproduce its data tables, but she might then be asked to prove that her source is reliable. Really skeptical readers just never give up.
5. And at a time when so- called experts are quick to tell us what to do and think based on studies whose data we never see, careful readers have learned to view reports of evidence skeptically. Even when you think you have good evidence, be clear how it was collected and by whom. If it was collected by others, >nd and cite a source as close to the evidence as you can get.
6. We know this distinction between evidence and reports of evidence must seem a >ne one, but it emphasizes two important issues. First, data you take from a source have invariably been shaped by that source, not to misrepresent them, but to put them in a form that serves that source's ends.
7. Even if you collected the data yourself, you tidied them up, making them seem more coherent than what you actually saw, counted, and recorded in your notes.
8. This often squishy quality of reports of reports (of reports of reports) is why people who read lots of research are so demanding about the reliability of evidence. If you collect data yourself, they'll want to know how you did it.
9. We live in an age where we are all subjected to research reports and opinion surveys that are at best dubious and at worst faked, so you have to assure your readers that they can trust your data.
10. Getting the easy things right shows respect for your readers and is the best training for dealing with the hard things. You can sometimes use even questionable evidence, if you acknowledge its dubious quality.