

CSC: CoR: Chapter 9: Assembling Reasons and Evidence

The 10 **salient sentence strings** presented below are lifted from the chapter as is, without modification (except, perhaps, for a bit of punctuation here or there). They are presented in order of appearance in the chapter.

Ten Salient Sentence Strings

1. Readers look first for the core of an argument, a claim and its support. They look particularly at its set of reasons to judge its plausibility and their order to judge its logic. If they think those reasons make sense, they will look at the evidence you present, the bedrock of every argument. If they don't believe the evidence, they'll reject the reasons and, with them, your claim. So as you assemble your argument, you must offer readers a plausible set of reasons, in a clear, logical order, based on evidence they will accept.
2. Once you've arranged your reasons in a plausible order, be sure you have sufficient 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. The problem is, you don't get to decide that; your readers *do*. To count as evidence, a statement must report something that readers agree not to question, at least for the purposes of the argument. But if they do question it, what you think is hard factual evidence is for them only a reason, and you have not yet reached that bedrock of evidence on which your argument must rest.
3. If you can imagine readers plausibly asking, not once but many times, *How do you know that? What facts make it true?*, you have not yet reached what readers want—a bedrock of uncontested evidence. 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, find and cite a source as close to the evidence as you can get.
4. When we talk about evidence, we typically use foundational metaphors: good evidence is *solid, hard, the bedrock foundation* on which we *build* arguments, something we can *see for ourselves*. Bad evidence is *flimsy, weak, or thin*. Language like that encourages readers to think of evidence as a reality independent of anyone's interpretation and judgment. But data are always constructed and shaped by those who collect and use them as evidence. As you build your argument, keep in mind that your evidence will *count* as evidence only if your readers accept it without question, at least for the moment.
5. [D]ata 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. For example, suppose you want to show that the cult of celebrity distorts rational compensation, and you need evidence that athletes and entertainers are paid far more than top doctors, generals, and government officials. [...] [U]nless you can peek at the tax returns of Oprah and Tiger Woods (and who knows how reliable they would be), you would have to depend on reports of those incomes that may or may not have been systematically collected and compiled from still more distant reports. Unless you can talk

to those who counted, organized, and reported the original data, you'll be at three or four removes from the evidence itself before you use it for your own purposes. (And at least one reporter in that chain of reports almost certainly miscopied some of the data.)

6. [W]hen you in turn report those data as your own evidence, you cannot avoid manipulating them once again, at least by putting them in a new context. 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. In fact, even before you started collecting any facts at all, you had to decide what to count, how to categorize the numbers, how to order them, whether to present them in the form of a table, bar chart, or graph.
7. Once you know the kind of evidence your readers expect, you must test the reliability of yours: is it *sufficient* and *representative*, reported *accurately* and *precisely*, and taken from an *authoritative* source?
8. Careful readers are predisposed to be skeptical, so they will seize on the most trivial mistake in your evidence as a sign of your unreliability in everything else. Whether your research argument depends on data collected in a lab, in the field, in the library, or online, record those data completely and clearly, then double-check them before, as, and after you write them up. Getting the easy things right shows respect for your readers and is the best training for dealing with the hard things [...] [I]f you point to evidence that seems to support your claim but then reject it as unreliable, you show yourself to be cautious, self critical, and thus trustworthy.
9. [A]necdotal evidence can be persuasive in ways that statistical representations of data are not. The very persuasiveness of the telling example, the case study, or the exception that proves the rule makes argument by anecdote attractive but also risky because an argument is only as strong as its evidence.
10. Different fields define and evaluate evidence differently. If you're a beginner, you'll need time to learn the kinds of evidence that readers in your field accept and reject. The most painful way to gain that experience is to be the object of their criticism. Less painful is to seek examples of arguments that failed because their evidence was judged unreliable. Listen to lectures and class discussions for the kinds of arguments that your instructors criticize because they think that the evidence is weak.