

Evaluating Arguments

Connections

Have you ever ...

- Watched an infomercial for a new product?
- Listened to a talk radio show about a political topic?
- Read an editorial in a newspaper or online?

Commercials, talk radio or TV shows, and editorials all present arguments. A commercial tries to convince you to buy a product. A talk show or editorial presents an opinion. How do you know who to believe or what evidence you can trust? How do you explain why one argument is more believable than another?

Arguments can be crafted to make you respond emotionally or to seem logical, even if they are not. Many arguments sound perfectly reasonable the first time you read or hear them. On further examination, you may begin to see weaknesses.

A successful argument proves its claim using relevant evidence and sound reasoning. To evaluate whether an argument is credible and sound, describe the elements of the argument:

- Is its claim clear?
- Is the evidence credible?
- Is the speaker reliable?

After you describe the claim, evidence, and speaker, use this information to write an evaluation of the argument.





Describe the Claim, Evidence, and Speaker

When you evaluate an argument, you aren't giving your own opinion of the topic. Your goal is to objectively analyze the author's argument. This skill will help you write about arguments and make decisions about controversial topics.

When you describe the claim, evidence, and speaker, you assign value. For example, if you describe a claim as unreasonable and unclear, then it is not a strong claim. If you describe evidence as specific, credible, and from a trusted source, it is strong evidence.

Examine the following argument.

Two years of college education should be available free to all qualified U.S. students. By 2018, over 60 percent of jobs will require workers with at least some college education, but public support of education is down in 48 states. At the same time, employers are cutting back (or at least not expanding) their training programs. They are, in essence, expecting candidates to show up fully qualified, according to an article in the *Las Vegas Review-Journal*.¹

Two years of free postsecondary education would address the problem of filling jobs with qualified workers. Government investment in free higher education would stimulate the economy by allowing college graduates more spending capacity. More people would attend college if finances weren't a barrier. Other countries who make this investment see a payoff in the quality of their work forces and lifestyles.

The benefits of this policy are obvious. Students would be more motivated to graduate high school, knowing that they have options after they graduate. Under this policy, students would decide immediately on a major or training program best suited to them and would be more likely to finish quickly and begin working.

Currently, a college degree is out of reach to many students, limiting their potential. A lack of college education prevents young adults from being financially stable enough to support a family, buy a home, or start a business. Even those who graduate college aren't assured of financial security. Those who leave college owing thousands in student loans and still can't find work are in grave financial situations. A free two-year degree would help many young people get started in careers. This would benefit individuals and also the society to which they contribute.



¹ “By 2018, 60 percent of job openings will require college education,” Eli Amdur, *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, available at <http://www.reviewjournal.com/news/education/2018-60-percent-job-openings-will-require-college-education>

Describe the Claim

First, identify the claim. The claim is the idea that the writer is attempting to prove. Summarize the claim in one sentence. Then, describe the claim. You can use the following words to describe the claim and identify your reasoning.



Negative ➔	Claim	← Positive
Unreasonable	Somewhat reasonable	Reasonable
Unclear	Somewhat clear	Clear

- ? 1. Identify and describe the claim of the argument, giving reasons for your description.

The claim is clear: that two years of college education should be free to U.S. students. It is stated at the beginning of the argument. The claim is somewhat reasonable. The government provides many services and could expand public education by two years. However, this would incur significant costs and changes in the educational system.

Describe the Evidence

Use **STAR Support** criteria to examine the evidence. Is it **Specific, Timely, Accurate,** and **Relevant**? Be sure to evaluate the source. Is the source untrustworthy or unknown? Is the source an expert?

Evidence must also be **sufficient**. There must be enough evidence to prove the claim. Use the following words to describe evidence.



Negative ➔	Evidence	← Positive
Insufficient/vague	Some evidence	Specific
Out-of-date	Unknown date	Timely
Inaccurate	Unknown source	Accurate
Irrelevant	Somewhat relevant	Relevant

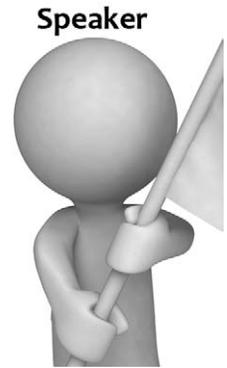
- ? 2. Describe the evidence in the argument, giving reasons for your description.

One piece of evidence that is specific, timely, accurate, and relevant is that over 60% of jobs will require degrees by 2018. This fact comes from a newspaper article. Other statements are vague, such as the idea that students would quickly decide on majors. This idea isn't supported by specifics and seems mainly to be speculation. It has no source. Overall, the evidence seems insufficient, especially since it does not address the costs of the proposal.

Describe the Speaker

The speaker is the author of an argument. Some speakers are biased, such as a company trying to sell a product. Others are reliable experts.

Many speakers are unknown, except through their arguments. A speaker who makes contradictory statements or uses emotional pleas to distract from the argument is not trustworthy. Also examine how the speaker addresses arguments from the opposition. Does the author ignore opponents?



Negative ➡	Speaker	◀ Positive
Untrustworthy/biased	Unknown	Expert
Ignores or misrepresents opponents	Acknowledges opponents	Addresses legitimate counterarguments

- ? 3. Describe the speaker, giving reasons for your description.

The speaker’s expertise or bias is unknown. He or she acknowledges that the opposition exists but does not address any counterarguments. The speaker is also somewhat contradictory. The statement that college graduates often cannot find jobs undermines the idea that two years of free college is a solution.

Write an Evaluation

Combine your descriptions of the claim, speaker, and evidence to write an evaluation. Start with a central idea that states the overall strength or weakness of the argument and use specific details to explain your descriptions of the claim, speaker, and evidence. Your evaluation should have a beginning, middle, and ending.

- ? 4. Write a paragraph evaluating the argument.

See the Answers and Explanations section on page 113 for a sample response.

Practice
It!

Use the following passage for exercises 1 through 4.

Holiday parades are a waste of public resources. They are admittedly festive and happy occasions, but they serve no civic purpose that couldn't be otherwise served by a concert, fireworks show, or fair. Marching bands can be heard at football games, and balloons and floats are simply unnecessary diversions.

At famous parades, such as the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade or Mardi Gras, viewers, who are often inebriated, gather in the streets only to watch other people walk at various speeds. These parades block traffic and create trash. They require police and emergency responder overtime. This cost would be better spent funding environmental programs, shelters, education, and other public services.

-  1. Describe the claim in the passage, giving reasons for your description.
-  2. Describe the evidence in the passage, giving reasons for your description.
-  3. Describe the speaker in the passage, giving reasons for your description.
-  4. Write a well-organized paragraph evaluating the argument. Include suggestions to improve the argument.

The Writing Process



Evaluate

When you evaluate your writing, describe your claim, evidence, and yourself as a speaker. Look for ways to develop your reliability as a speaker. One way is by acknowledging the opposition and respectfully responding to counterarguments.

Use the following passage for exercises 5 through 8.

Driverless cars are our future, and we should encourage their development by passing laws allowing driverless cars on roads throughout the country. Nevada, Florida, and California already have laws allowing driverless cars. These software-controlled cars have successfully navigated San Francisco's steep and twisting Lombard Street and driven over 300,000 miles of tests. Only one accident has happened during testing: a human driver rear-ended a driverless car. With their incredible record of safety, driverless cars will reduce drunk driving, make commutes more productive, and reduce insurance costs. In a March 2012 video posted by Google, a legally blind man goes through a drive-through in a self-driving Toyota Prius. This video highlights the benefits of driverless car technology to disabled people. Why not allow this safe and beneficial technology to flourish?

-  5. Describe the claim in the passage, giving reasons for your description.
-  6. Describe the evidence in the passage, giving reasons for your description.
-  7. Describe the speaker in the passage, giving reasons for your description.
-  8. Write a well-organized paragraph evaluating the argument. Include suggestions to improve the argument.

Build Your Writing Skills

To compare two arguments, compare your evaluations of the claim, evidence, and speaker. It will help you determine which argument is stronger and why.



Check Your Skills

Use the following passages for exercise 1.

The presence of royalty gives a nation a sense of pride and history that should be cherished and honored. Great Britain is an excellent example of what a royal family can add to the culture. The constitutional monarchy allows Britain to experience the best of both worlds: the continuity of tradition and the progressive possibilities of a democracy.

Around the world, people celebrate royal weddings and births. When Prince Charles and Lady Diana married, it was an international sensation. An estimated 750 million people watched. The birth of Prince George of Cambridge in 2013 spurred composer Paul Mealor to write a new lullaby, “Sleep On.” Shared events like this bring a nation together, forming cultural milestones.

In Great Britain and other nations with historic monarchies, the royal family is a link to the past. Although royal roles may be ceremonial, a royal family allows the average citizen to celebrate a shared history and national pride.



The family of the Prince of Wales: Engraving by Shyubler. Published in the magazine *Niva*, published by A.F. Marx, St. Petersburg, Russia, 1888

Royalty devalues the average citizen. A monarchy flies in the face of the idea that “all men are created equal.” If royalty were eliminated, any loss of tradition would be more than replaced by a thirst for innovation, improvement, and individuality.

Through its monarchy, Great Britain makes a silent statement that some people are inherently better than others. Members of the royal family have special treatment because of an accident of birth. In an article on CNN, Graham Smith details the problems with British monarchy: “It is secretive, having recently lobbied successfully to have itself removed entirely from the reaches of our Freedom of Information laws; it lobbies government ministers for improvements to its financial benefits and for its own private agenda; it is hugely costly—an estimated £202 million a year.”¹ The British monarchy is outdated, undemocratic, and costly. On the other hand, the U.S. system of democracy, where anyone might earn the presidency, encourages self-improvement because birth is not destiny.

¹Source: “Why UK should abolish its ‘failed’ monarchy” by Graham Smith on CNN.com
<http://www.cnn.com/2012/05/30/world/europe/uk-jubilee-republicans/index.html>



1. Analyze the two arguments to determine which position is best supported. Use relevant and specific evidence from both passages to support your response.

Write your answer below or type your response on a computer. Take approximately 45 minutes to respond.

*Remember
the Concept*

Describe the **claim**,
evidence, and **speaker**
to evaluate an
argument.

Use the questions on page 99 to evaluate your response.