

# HOW TO WRITE HIGH QUALITY ARGUMENTS

## 1. The Qualities of Good Evidence

The best way to support debate arguments is to have evidence. Evidence might come from a person's direct experience, common knowledge, or based on a story that someone told. Most high-quality and meaningful evidence for debate rounds comes from research done in the library or on the internet. Generally, look for examples, statistics or testimony that supports the claims you want to make. Evidence can come from books, magazines, journals, newspapers, and Web sites. Debates are often won because one team has better evidence.

### **Look for evidence that is full of solid reasoning and warrants, not just claims.**

Evidence that has reasoning is more persuasive and credible than evidence without it. If someone asked you to do something and you asked why and all they said was "because I said so" it wouldn't be very persuasive because they weren't offering a reason.

Similarly in a debate, suppose a debater wanted to prove that the counter-insurgency strategy in Afghanistan was going to work. If she found evidence referring to other historical examples where counter-insurgency worked, such as Iraq and El Salvador, she would be providing the reasoning – or "warrant" – for her claim. That evidence would be superior to quotes that just offered the conclusion that counter-insurgency can work, but didn't provide support.

**Look for evidence that is a few sentences or a paragraph long** The more reasoning the evidence provides, the stronger it will be. But evidence should also be concise so that it doesn't take forever to read in the debate. A good rule of thumb is evidence should be three to four sentences long, although there is nothing wrong with longer evidence. Usually, one sentence is not enough to convey an effective claim and reasoning.

**Look for evidence that is recent.** Some claims are true at certain times but false over the course of time. The more recent evidence is the greater chance it might remain true, other factors equal, and that makes the evidence more believable. Evidence from 1998 for a prediction of who was going to win the 2011 Super Bowl would not be very persuasive. Similarly, evidence from the past month about the military base in Okinawa is likely to be more credible than evidence from two years ago.

**Look for evidence that comes from qualified sources.** Qualifications refer to the credentials or experience of the author of the evidence. Other things equal it is assumed that sources who are more experienced or credentialed are more likely to be right. Debate judges often evaluate the qualifications of evidence to resolve which team has a stronger argument.

**Look for evidence that comes from unbiased sources.** Some sources, while they may be very experienced and credentialed, might have questionable credibility because they are "biased". Being biased means that the source has a motivation that could override their interest in telling the truth. A politician might be more concerned about their re-election than they are about the truth. A corporate executive might have strong economic interest in saying something that isn't the truth. A friend or relative might be motivated by loyalty or love more than the desire to tell the truth.

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## **2. How to Find Evidence: Research Strategies**

Debaters need to have a plan of attack when they begin to research. When a debater sets out to find evidence it is helpful to have an idea of what arguments they are trying to support ahead of time. Those ideas can often come from brainstorming sessions among teammates and maybe coaches. As debaters think of ideas for arguments, they should write them down and save them to review while they research.

Doing outstanding research is mostly a function of effort and experience. The best-researched teams are the ones that spend the most time doing it. Just like in most things, the more work one put into it the greater are the chances of success. Some times it takes a while to find any evidence for an argument at all. Other times a debater can find average-quality evidence quickly but it takes more time to find high-quality evidence.

Thoroughness is crucial and can prove decisive in winning and losing. As a debater gains more experience with researching it becomes easier as they develop shortcuts and strategies for being efficient. As a debater becomes more experienced with debate rounds she will learn a sense of how good evidence must be to help win the debate.

**The Library** The school or community library might be a good source for finding materials on the debate topic. Evidence can often be found in books, reference documents, journals and magazines and even hard copies of newspapers. Librarians can help find sources and they will be eager to help if they know the topic that is being researched.

**The Internet** Most debate research these days is done on the internet, which means a debater can research wherever they have access to a computer, such as home or school. Start by using a search engine like Google or Yahoo!. Use a basic or advanced search in one of these engines to find relevant Web sites, newspapers and reports. Google Scholar is a good resource for finding articles in academic journals, although sometimes a subscription is necessary to get access to those articles. Consider constraining the dates for searches to focus on more recent sources. Look at the search result page closely to see if they provide additional links to follow.

**Evaluating the Internet** The internet is a fantastic resource for debate research. Most debaters are already very experienced with how to use it to find things that they want. In many ways the internet helps to equalize access to research across urban, suburban and rural areas. On the other hand, there are many potential trapdoors with internet research – namely, anyone with a keyboard can “publish” internet materials. It is important for debaters to sort out the good from the bad.

Unfortunately, most of this evaluation has to be done on a case-by-case basis. Judge a Web site based on the factors of authority, accuracy, objectivity and how up-to-date it is. Does the site provide authoritative references and footnotes? Do its claims conform to what you already know, and what other authors claim? Does the site treat alternative ideas fairly and thoroughly? Has it been updated recently? All of these factors, plus considering the qualifications of the author, combine to give an indication if it is worth quoting or should be avoided.

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## 3. How to Cite Evidence

When a debater finds evidence it is essential that to attach a complete citation so that someone can look it up if they want to. Cites work just like a bibliography for a research paper. Making sure the citation is correct is often boring and detailed, but it is very important.

**A complete citation includes five parts: (1) the author, (2) the author's qualification, (3) the source, (4) the date, and (5) the URL or page number.**

**Author** The author is the person who wrote or said the quote that is the basis of the evidence. The author is the person who wrote the book, article, blog post etc. The author might be a group of people, an organization, or a publication like the *New York Times*.

**Qualification** Who is the author, and why should the judge find them credible? The author may have a particular expertise or experience that makes their statements more credible than if the average person had written it. Source qualifications are especially important with internet evidence since anyone can publish a Web page, even someone with no expertise or experience about a subject. Many times, a debate judge will resolve issues of clash based on which debater reads evidence with the most qualified source. Avoid quoting authors who have a strong personal, economic or political bias, as that may undermine their credibility. Sometimes searching a Web page or following a link is necessary to find the author's qualification.

**Source** The source is the primary description of the location of the evidence. The source could be any of these things: a book or report title, journal title, newspaper title, the name of a think-tank or group, and the Congressional committee name. The source might be identified sufficiently in the URL and does not need to be typed separately in a cite.

**Complete Date** Always cite the most complete date possible. Not only does this help in the evaluation of the credibility of the evidence – when it is a time-sensitive claim – it also helps other people be look up and track down the research. The cite should contain the same level of detail on the date as the original source does. If the evidence is from a newspaper article published on April 20, 2010, it is not complete if the cite just says “2010.” Some Web site pages do not have dates. In that case, indicate “no date available.” When citing evidence from the internet, cite the date the evidence was published, not the date accessed.

**Page Numbers or URL** Every cite must include the URL or page number where the evidence was found. The “URL” is the Web page address, which can be copied and pasted from the browser. If the evidence comes from a Web site, a page number is not necessary but the URL must be included. The guiding principle is to provide enough information so one's opponent can quickly and accurately find the evidence in question.

**Michael O'Hanlon, Senior Fellow, Brookings Institution, April 26, 2010**  
[[http://www.brookings.edu/opinions/2010/0426\\_afghanistan\\_troops\\_ohanlon.aspx](http://www.brookings.edu/opinions/2010/0426_afghanistan_troops_ohanlon.aspx)]

**Austin Long, assistant prof, Columbia Univ Sch of Intl Affairs, Spring 2010**  
[ORBIS, Spring 2010 vol. 54. Issue 1, p. 199]

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## 4. How to Tag Evidence

Once evidence is cited it must be “tagged”. The tag is a short description of the argument made by the evidence. The tag is read out loud in the debate before the evidence is read. It functions sort of like a preview. Tagging is an under-appreciated part of writing good arguments. Thoughtful tags can get the most out of the research product, while lazy tagging can undercut the effectiveness of the evidence.

**The tag is very important** The tag is the way most of judges will understand evidence initially and throughout the debate. Many judges will try to write down the tag instead of what the evidence actually says. Flows for constructive speeches are usually a collection of tags.

**Tags should explain the argument** Tags should be relatively succinct, but include a clear explanation of the argument. They should rarely be longer than one sentence. Tags should be written as complete sentences so it does not sound like pure jargon. Use language in the tag that the judge will understand.

**Tags should emphasize reasoning** Tags should emphasize the reasoning in evidence, not the claims. Generally, good debates occur at the reasoning level because the two sides reach their opposing claims quickly. Is the war in Afghanistan going well? Is military presence important for American primacy? The claim and counterclaim are the easy part – winning debates depends on how sophisticated and strong reasoning (warrants) for those claims are. Therefore, it is advisable to load tags with reasoning, not claims.

**Avoid Repetitive Tags** Tags should be different from one another. Avoid identical, or essentially identical tags on the same brief. Find differences between the reasoning in the two pieces of evidence, and reflect those differences in the tags. Don’t play the “synonym tag” game either. The two tags “Obama popularity is increasing” and “Obama popularity is growing” are examples of synonym tags. They are not helpful in differentiating evidence. Instead, feature the different warrants in the evidence and your evidence will sound more persuasive.

**Put the Important Words at the Start of the Tag** Place the important content in the early part of your tag. Put the important part of the reasoning in the first part of the tag and the general part of the claim toward the end. Don’t “bury the lead” as they say in the newspaper business. There is a simple reason for this, judges write down the first part of the tag more than the end.

For example, if you have evidence that makes the claim that military officers are generally conservative and the reasoning for this claim is a recent poll of 1,000 officers which compares the officers’ attitudes to the general public.

Weak tag: **MILITARY OFFICERS ARE CONSERVATIVE**  
Better tag: **SURVEY SHOWS MILITARY OFFICERS ARE CONSERVATIVE**  
Best tag: **RECENT SURVEY SHOWS MILITARY OFFICERS ARE TWICE AS CONSERVATIVE AS THE GENERAL PUBLIC**

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## 5. How To Write A Brief

Once the evidence is cited and tagged it is time to write the briefs. Briefs are the full pages of evidence that are organized into arguments and that are read to the judges. For many debaters this is the most fun part of the argument-writing process. This is where arguments are actually organized and constructed in a way that they are most powerfully presented.

**Think Through the Organization** It might be helpful to outline an organization for the argument before the briefing start. Even very experienced researchers can benefit from this step. It helps clarify exactly what arguments are available and prioritize them by strength and logical development. It also helps eliminate redundancies. If several pieces of evidence are under one point in the outline, read through the evidence again to find distinctions between the cards and then retag them to reflect those differences.

**Avoid one-card briefs** Briefs should generally consist of more than one piece of evidence. It is lazy to block virtually every card on its own brief. One-card blocking is really little more than changing the size of the paper on which the card is printed. Value is added at the briefing stage by recognizing the inter-relationships between cards. Let the organization reflect that. A few one-card briefs are fine, though.

**Use the Top Corners to Help Organize** A debate squad will want to adopt standardized policies for what information to put up in the top corners of every brief. The school name is common for the top line of the top left corner. Underneath that it is generally wise to put the name of the argument. The third line in the top corner could contain the name of the debater who writes the brief. The top right corner is generally used for page numbering.

**Titles of Briefs Should Help With Organization** The title of the brief should go in the center of the top of the page and should be underlined. Make sure that the title remains exactly consistent across the various pages of that sub-file. Example: if you have a 4-page file on “Afghanistan War Getting Worse” do not title page one “Afghan War Worse” page two “Afghan War Bloodier,” page three “Afghan War Increasing Violence,” and page four “Afghanistan Getting Worse” as this makes it difficult to keep your file organized. It also makes it easier to know if a page is missing. The title should be succinct – but must balance that with some bit of a warrant or specific claim.

**Write Frontline or Shell Briefs** Some arguments are best organized with a “frontline” or “shell” and then extension blocks. The frontline/shell is the evidence to be read in the first speech. Generally that means it is the strongest evidence.

**Write Extension Briefs** Extension briefs fall into two categories. Some are designed to strengthen and support the same points made in the original frontline. Others are designed to respond to arguments that are anticipated to be made against the frontline. These are called “answer to” briefs. The top of “answer to” briefs usually begins with the abbreviation AT: or A2: and then the argument being answered.