Evidence

Brief: When persuasive speakers appeals to reason, they use logically constructed arguments based on empirical evidence to persuade their audience.

Learning Objective: Define and know how to use evidence to support a persuasive speech proposition.

Key Terms:
- **Empirical evidence**: Information acquired by observation or experimentation, in the form of recorded data, which may be the subject of analysis (e.g. by scientists).
- **Evidence**: The available body of facts or information indicating whether a belief or proposition is true.

What is Evidence?

Evidence refers to the available body of facts or information indicating whether a belief or proposition is true. Empirical evidence is information that verifies the truth (which accurately corresponds to reality) or falsity (inaccuracy) of a claim. Empirical evidence is information acquired by observation or experimentation, in the form of recorded data, which may be the subject of analysis (e.g. by scientists).

Secondary sources describe, discuss, interpret, comment upon, analyze, evaluate, summarize, and process primary sources. Secondary source materials can be articles in newspapers or popular magazines, book or movie reviews, or articles found in scholarly journals that discuss or evaluate someone else's original research.

When you appeal to reason, you use logically constructed arguments based on empirical evidence to persuade your audience to agree with you. You might use many different forms of evidence to support your rational appeal. The burden of proof is on you the speaker as you develop your appeals to the audience.

As you deploy a rational appeal, consider the following questions:

- Is my reasoning sound?
- What will the audience accept as believable evidence?

The success or failure of the appeal depends on how well the evidence has been defined and laid out for the audience.
Evaluating Evidence

In the context of persuasive speaking, evidence can be evaluated for its persuasive ability in terms of its accuracy, understandability, and relevant context.

Accuracy

The evidence must be accurate, truthfully constructed, and defined. For example, if your argument hinges on the premise that grass is purple, no rhetorical technique will help you persuade your audience that something that is obviously not true is suddenly true.

Evidence must be accurate to be credible. Your credibility as a speaker rests on the verifiable accuracy of the evidence you choose to include in your argument.

Audience Understanding

Before your evidence can be accepted by your audience, it needs to be understood. Evidence must be presented thoroughly and in a way in which the audience can comprehend. For example, an evidential appeal that uses rising atmospheric carbon dioxide levels as evidence for stricter pollution regulation will not be effective if the audience does not understand the implications of rising atmospheric carbon dioxide levels. Your audience members must be able to understand the evidence you present before it can be effectively influence.

Relevant Context

The evidence you choose must be clearly defined within the context of the appeal. For example, a textbook definition of the different types of bonds between the atoms of carbon dioxide is not relevant information for why the tax rate should be lowered. In other words, a lowered tax rate might be a good idea, but it’s not a context that furthers understanding about atoms of carbon dioxide.

Information used in evidential appeals must serve two purposes at once. First, it must be complete enough that it strengthens the appeal. If the evidence is weak, incomplete, or irrelevant, it does not help the appeal, and may even hurt its persuasiveness.

Secondly, the evidence must be defined only as comprehensively as necessary. The purpose of an evidential appeal is to persuade the audience. Remember, overwhelming your audience with too much information or evidence may only serve to confuse them.
From Concept to Action

From a persuasive speech topic and proposition that you’re developing, choose one main point. Conduct research, using primary and secondary sources, to identify at least five pieces of empirical evidence that support your main point. Next, give your evidence the evaluation test (as suggested in this module). Is it accurate? Will your audience be able to understand it? Does it fit within the context you’re developing for your speech? Based on the answer to these questions, rank your evidence in order, from the strongest to weakest. Always lead with your strongest evidence. But, don’t stop there. Continue researching your weaker evidence to see if you can find more data to support it.

OER IMAGE SOURCES:


OER TEXT SOURCES:
