

One Page Concept Review: Incorporating Evidence

What is it?

Arguments without evidence are simply assertions, and assertions alone are not persuasive. The idea that you should be able to back up your claims with evidence is almost so self-evident as to not need explaining.

Why should I care?

Depending on well you do this, you can radically improve your score on the AP exam essays, though this obviously has implications for outside the test as well. People generally pay attention to those who can back up what they're saying and ignore those who can't.

How do I do it?

- **Use a mixture of paraphrase and quotation for Q1 and Q2 essays.** Quotation should be reserved for places where 1) the text says it perfectly and succinctly, or 2) you are engaging the specific language of the text (i.e., if you're analyzing the connotation of diction, imagery, or figurative language). Paraphrase should be used when you're dealing with concepts in the text, or if you're using supporting evidence to back up the claims you make when analyzing your primary example.
- **Always contextualize evidence.** This is more important for essays where the text is not right in front of the reader (on the AP exam, the Q3 essay), but even if you're writing about a single passage or poem, you need to set up your evidence. The reader should understand: **who** is speaking, to **what** the quote is referring, and **when** the quote occurs (either the chronology in terms of plot or when the evidence occurs in relation to the rest of the text). Obviously sometimes not all of these questions are as relevant all the time, but err on the side of too much information, not too little.
- **For Q3 essays, the more specific your evidence, the better.** There's a reasonably good chance the AP grader might not know the work that you're writing about (since these are open-ended essays). For example, instead of writing about the general gist of a conversation between two characters, establish *exactly* what the conflict is or the point a character is making.
- **Weave quotation into analysis.** Use only the words and phrases that you need, especially for diction, imagery, or figurative language analysis. Ideally, your examples and analysis should blend together into a seamless whole. You also don't want your paragraphs to read like you're following a formula to set up every quote ("For example, when ____, the author writes, ____"). There is nothing wrong with using this type of stereotyped format, but if this is *all* you're doing, your essay reads like you were filling in a worksheet (and will be graded as such).
- **Alternate transitions to introduce examples.** The two most common ones ("for instance" and "for example") should be alternated to provide variety.
- One caveat: **Evidence is important, but explanation is more important.** It's just a lot harder to make an explanation review sheet, since it is obviously so context specific.

How do students screw this up?

Assuming the Reader Knows the Piece

- **It is your job to teach the selection.** That means you have to set stuff up so that your argument is comprehensible and easy to follow. This is true to a lesser extent when you're writing about a short selection (as in the Q1 or Q2 essays on the AP test), but you should still approach the task *as if you're the teacher, and the reader is the student*. Even for the essays with short texts that the graders literally have in front of them, you are not absolved from your responsibility to *teach the piece*.

- **You should be able to follow the argument even if you have never read the selection.** This is especially true of essays about texts that are large (plays and novels), but it is still good advice even for shorter texts. Imagine how annoying it would be to read an essay where you constantly had to go back and forth between it and the text in order for it to make any sense. Because it is annoying, most graders won't bother (and simply assign you a poor grade).
- **Do not forget to explain how the evidence proves your point.** The evidence never speaks for itself. Even if the application of the evidence is obvious to you, do not assume it is for the reader. In fact, assume that the reader already thinks that you're full of crap so that you'll be more tempted to over-explain than under-explain.

Not Finding the Right Paraphrase/Quotation Balance

- **If you have access to the text, quotation is not optional.** Sorry, but paraphrase isn't good enough for Q1 or Q2 essays. Nor would you want it to be, since quotation forces you address the text in a *specific* way (which usually translates into higher marks).
- **Paraphrase should be treated like quotation.** Especially for more self-evident things, you do not always need quotes, but even when you're paraphrasing, it works exactly the same way as with quotation. It needs to be specific (probably even more so than quotation); it still needs to be set up with context; and you need to engage it specifically in your explanation (the evidence never speaks for itself).
- **Do not over-quote or over-paraphrase.** Essays that reproduce whole blocks of text, string together endless quote snippets, or have way more summary and set-up than analysis will receive lower half scores. It's especially easy to write a near plot summary for Q3 essays, deluding yourself that you've actually accomplished something worthwhile (this is more likely to happen when you don't narrow the topic enough).

General Idiocy

- **Do not make factual mistakes in your writing.** For Q3 essays, just because a grader may not have read a text, do not assume that you can make up anything. At the very least, they will probably know it by reputation or will have read another work by the same author (and will therefore know what to expect from that author). If the details seem fishy to the grader, they will simply ask someone else at the grading table for help or verification.
- In the same vein, **know the name of the author and names of the characters for Q3 essays.** There's no excuse for not doing this minimum amount of preparation for the test. This also means you should be able to spell the names correctly. If you can memorize formulas for math and science tests, you can memorize some names for this one too. Make flashcards if you need to.
- **Do not take evidence out of context.** This usually happens when students are trying to over-simplify a text, so they have to willfully ignore other parts of the texts to make their thesis work.
- **Quote introductions must be grammatical.** *For example, "_____"* makes zero grammatical sense and is just poor writing. At the very least, this would need to be *For example, the author writes, "_____."*
- **Dropping quotes without quote introductions is simply bad writing.** This is not middle school; stop writing like it is.
- **Do not use identical transitions each time you set up or explain evidence.** Formula writing is bad writing, so if you've set something up one way already, that way should now be off the table for the rest of the essay (especially since these essays are so short). This is also why weaving your quotes into your analysis is so effective: it doesn't read like a formula.
- **Do not quote or paraphrase multiple pieces of evidence and then generalize about it all at the end of a paragraph.** Immediately after the evidence comes explanation. Evidence, then explanation. Not evidence, evidence, evidence, *then* explanation.