

WEIGHING UP THE EVIDENCE

ASK YOURSELF IF THE EVIDENCE IS:

Reliable	- can you trust the source it came from?
Current	- for its purpose?
Accurate	- do any figures add up, or are they misleading?
Relevant	- to the arguments being presented?
Sufficient	- enough to prove something?
Complete	- has anything been omitted (perhaps deliberately)?
Valid	- does it support or prove what it claims to support or prove?

THINGS TO LOOK FOR TO HELP YOU ANSWER THESE QUESTIONS

The sources of information the writer or speaker uses

Are the sources “official” (for example, written by a Government department or a well known, professional organisation)?

Are they written by someone who is a well known expert in the field?

Are they considered to be key, “classic” texts?

The dates of the sources of information the writer or speaker uses

Are the sources of information sufficiently up to date, for their purpose? Remember that although you would normally expect sources to be up to date, in some subject areas it may be alright to use older sources; in history, for example.

Statistics and surveys

Sample size - for the statistic to be reliable and valid, the number of people asked in a survey should be a big enough proportion of the total number of people who could have been asked.

Sample representation – for the statistic to be reliable and valid, the people asked should be a representative cross section of all the people who could have been asked.

Beware of the use of words such as “most” and “many”. These mean little; absolute figures are more reliable.

Generalisations

This is making conclusions based on insufficient evidence. You can identify generalisations by asking the above questions.

Look and listen also for words such as “normally”, “generally” and “usually”, all of which can indicate that the writer is generalising.

Ideas and opinions based on particular values and beliefs (possible bias)

Some writers and speakers have strong beliefs, and may try to “convert” you to their way of thinking. One way in which they do this is to present only one side of an argument; in other words, a biased (subjective) picture. Party political broadcasts on the television are examples of this. Make sure the writer or speaker presents both sides of an argument and backs these up with reliable evidence; in other words, that he/she is unbiased (objective).

Emotive language

This is language designed to bring out an emotional reaction in the reader or listener. Such language is often biased and cannot be regarded as reliable evidence. Click here for some extreme examples of emotive language [[link](#) to Mad dogs and Englishmen – examples of emotive language info sheet].

Anecdotes (sob stories) are another way in which writers and speakers try to get the reader on their side by bringing out an emotional reaction. They are used a lot by tabloid newspapers.

Persuader words

These are words such as “clearly”, “naturally”, “obviously” and “surely”. They are closely related to emotive language, and are designed to get the reader or listener on the writer’s or speaker’s side.

Suggestion

This is the repetition of an argument so often that the reader or listener comes to believe it, without weighing up the evidence for and against it. It is sometime called propaganda, and was used in World War Two by the leaders of the nations which were at war. It is used today in similar and in many other contexts.

Logical reasoning

Do the writer or speaker’s arguments progress logically, step by step?

Are the writer’s or speaker’s conclusions based on the evidence they have presented?