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Craft of Research (CoR): Chapter 9 – Assembling Reasons and Evidence

The 10 **salient sentence strings** presented below are lifted from the chapter without modification. They are presented in order of appearance in the chapter.

Ten Salient Sentence Strings

1. You might find it useful to create a chart- like outline known as a "storyboard." To start a storyboard, write your main claim and each reason (and subreasons) at the top of separate index cards or pages. Then below each reason (or subreason), list the evidence that supports it. If you don't have the evidence yet, note the kind of evidence you'll need. Finally, arrange the pages or index cards on a table or wall to make their logical relationships visible at a glance. (Quote – bottom of page 132).

2. To count as evidence, a statement must report something that readers agree not to question, at least for the purposes of the argument. But if they do question it, what you think is hard factual evidence is for them only a reason, and you have not yet reached that bedrock of evidence on which your argument must rest. (Quote – bottom of page 133).

3. Now a complication: researchers rarely include in any report the evidence itself. Even if you collect your own data, counting rabbits in a field or interviewing the unemployed, your paper can only refer to or represent those rabbits and unemployed in words, numbers, tables, graphs, pictures, and so on. (Quote – top of page 135).

4. Second, when you in turn report those data as your own evidence, you cannot avoid manipulating them once again, at least by putting them in a new context. Even if you collected the data yourself, you tidied them up, making them seem more coherent than what you actually saw, counted, and recorded in your notes. In fact, even before you started collecting any facts at all, you had to decide what to count, how to categorize the numbers, how to order them, whether to present them in the form of a table, bar chart, or graph. Even photographs and video recordings reflect a particular point of view. In short, facts are shaped by those who collect them and again by the intentions of those who use them. (Quote – middle of page 136).

5. Once you know the kind of evidence your readers expect, you must test the reliability of yours: is it sufficient and representative, reported accurately and precisely, and taken from an authoritative source? These are not exotic criteria unique to academic research. We all apply them in our most ordinary conversations, even with children. (Quote – bottom of page 137).

6. Getting the easy things right shows respect for your readers and is the best training for dealing with the hard things. You can sometimes use even questionable evidence, if you acknowledge its dubious quality. In fact, if you point to evidence that seems to support your claim but then reject it as unreliable, you show yourself to be cautious, self- critical, and thus trustworthy. (Quote – bottom of page 138).

7. How much money is a great deal? How probable is a high probability— 30 percent? 80 percent? What counts as large and costly? Watch for words like some, most, many, almost, often, usually, frequently, generally, and so on. Such words can appropriately limit the breadth of a claim (see 8.3), but they can also fudge it if the researcher didn't work hard enough to get the precise numbers. (Quote – top of page 139).

8. Even if you offer lots of evidence, your readers still expect it to be representative of the full range of variation in what's available. The women in one or two Shakespearean plays do not represent all his women, any more than Shakespeare represents all Elizabethan drama. Readers are especially wary when your evidence is a small sample from a large body of data, as in surveys. Whenever you use sampled data, not only must your data be representative, but you must show that it is. (Quote – bottom of page 139).

9. If your claim depends on one or two examples, however well- chosen to be representative, there is a risk that your evidence will be dismissed as a form of cherry- picking. Of course, anecdotal evidence can be persuasive in ways that statistical representations of data are not. The very persuasiveness of the telling example, the case study, or the exception that proves the rule makes argument by anecdote attractive but also risky because an argument is only as strong as its evidence. (Quote – top of page 140).

10. In general, readers assign degrees of authority to sources based on their reputation for rigor and objectivity. For example, most people will accept data on the transmission of viruses that a researcher obtains from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control as credible evidence, even allowing for the possibility of error. However, evidence from Wikipedia will not be accepted in many circles because Wikipedia is not regarded as authoritative. "Consider the source" is the skeptic's rebuttal to evidence dis missed for lack of authority. (Quote – bottom of page 140).