

Supporting a Thesis

Your thesis -- the main point of your paper -- must be supported with detail or evidence. Readers are not likely to be impressed with generalized statements or observations. Even a personal narrative essay requires support to be effective. Simply stating, "The airplane trip was terrible" has little impact unless you "show" readers how bad the flight was with supporting detail:

The airplane trip was terrible. The flight was two hours late and overbooked. The cabin was unbearably hot. My seat was in the last row. I sat wedged between a snoring businessman and a restless ten-year-old who coughed non-stop. The meal consisted of a dry chicken sandwich and a rubbery stalk of celery. I put on the headphones in hopes of listening to some music, but the cord was frayed. We took off three hours behind schedule, encountered headwinds, and arrived in Denver after midnight. I missed my connections and slept in the terminal.

Similarly, a grant proposal, a research paper, or a letter to the editor seeking to persuade readers to accept a point of view cannot rest on a simple assertion. The argument that the university should expand library hours requires support to be effective:

During the 1998 budget crisis the university shortened library hours forty hours a week. Although the fiscal problems have been solved, the cut in library hours remains. Our university is currently the only college in the state without weekend library hours. The Campus Time's survey of 1,250 students revealed that the shortened library hours was the leading reason for the rise in students dropping out or requesting incompletes. For the 45% of students who work, weekends are the only times they can use the library. Nearly 22% of students are adults with full-time jobs who can only study or conduct research on the weekend. The university must restore the library to the schedule it maintained for over fifty years.

All writing -- whether a humorous column or a government report -- depends on support to be effective. The type of support you use depends on your goal, the intended audience, and the nature of the document.

Each type of support has strengths and weaknesses. In most

instances, writers rely on more than one form to influence readers.

PERSONAL OBSERVATIONS -- descriptive details and impressions about a person, place, or object.

- * Personal observations can be powerful -- provided they are carefully selected and clearly organized.
- * Personal observations, however, are subjective and may require additional factual support to support an argument.

FACTS -- objective details gathered by research or investigation

- * Facts can provide independent support for a writer's thesis. Facts can generally be verified by readers.
- * Facts can be used to add credibility to personal observations.
- * Facts, however, sometimes require background explanation. Informing readers that last year five hundred cars were stolen in your city means little unless you compare this number to last year's figures or figures from comparable cities.

TESTIMONY -- statements or quotations from experts or witnesses

- * The comments of other people can support a thesis by adding evidence and providing voices other than the writer's.
- * Testimony by experts, no matter how famous, can be biased and may require additional support. Be careful not to take comments out of context or assume that someone who is an expert in one field is an authority in another.

STATISTICS -- facts expressed in numbers

- * Statistics can distill a complex topic into a dramatic statement readers can quickly understand:

...one of three students has a full-time job.
...25% of this year's graduates are minorities.

- * Statistics are easy for readers to recall and repeat to others.
- * Statistics, however, must be explained. Because statistics can be misleading, readers often demand clarification before accepting them as being accurate.
Explain when and how the statistics were collected. Stress the reliability of their source.

EXAMPLES --specific events, situations, persons, or issues that represent a general trend, problem, or condition.

- * Describing the plight of a single homeless person can dramatize a social problem more effectively than a list of statistics. Examples allow you to introduce a human element into your writing.
- * Examples -- often called case studies -- can offer a microcosm view of a larger and complex issue.
- * Examples, however, can be misleading. Each person or situation is unique and therefore the experiences or attitudes of an individual cannot be assumed to fully reflect the larger issue.
- * Examples can distort perceptions of reality. A single mass shooting may lead people to feel there is a rising tide of violence in society -- even though FBI statistics may actually indicate a dramatic decrease in homicide.

STRATEGIES FOR USING SUPPORTING DETAILS

1. Select details that support your thesis

In conducting research or thinking about your paper you may come up with interesting facts, memorable examples, and impressive statistics about

the general topic -- but they may not support your thesis. *Make sure you include only information that directly supports your point of view.*

2. Make sure your sources are reliable and unbiased

If you are writing about the safety of nuclear power, your readers may be suspicious if you cite only sources from a utility company or an anti-nuclear organization.

* Select the most reliable sources possible. Be aware that many official sounding organizations are funded by corporations, labor unions, and lobbying groups with a clear political agenda.

* If objective data is not available, balance information from opposing sources.

3. Check the accuracy of your support

Too often writers use supporting details without double checking sources.

Don't rely on your memory. Verify quotations and statistics before using them as support.

4. Clearly organize supporting detail

Evidence will only be effective if it is easy for readers to follow.

* Use the modes of development -- comparison, cause and effect, or narration -- to organize details.

* Consider using tables, charts, graphs, or other visual aids to dramatize facts and statistics.

* Use paragraph breaks and transitional statements to signal shifts between details.

* Announce your method of organization in the introduction to provide readers with a road map to follow your train of ideas.