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Writing@CSU Writing Guide

Academic Evaluations

In our daily lives, we are continually evaluating objects, people, and ideas in our immediate environments. We pass judgments in conversation, while reading, while shopping, while eating, and while watching television or movies, often being unaware that we are doing so. Evaluation is an equally fundamental writing process, and writing assignments frequently ask us to make and defend value judgments.

Evaluation is an important step in almost any writing process, since we are constantly making value judgments as we write. When we write an "academic evaluation," however, this type of value judgment is the *focus* of our writing.

A Definition of Evaluation

Kate Kiefer, English Professor

Like most specific assignments that teachers give, writing evaluations mirrors what happens so often in our day-to-day lives. Every day we decide whether the temperature is cold enough to need a light or heavy jacket; whether we're willing to spend money on a good book or a good movie; whether the prices at the grocery store tell us to keep shopping at the same place or somewhere else for a better value. Academic tasks rely on evaluation just as often. Is a source reliable? Does an argument convince? Is the article worth reading? So writing evaluation helps students make this often unconscious daily task more overt and prepares them to examine ideas, facts, arguments, and so on more critically.

To evaluate is to assess or appraise. Evaluation is the process of examining a subject and rating it based on its important features. We determine how much or how little we *value* something, arriving at our judgment on the basis of criteria that we can define.

We evaluate when we write primarily because it is almost impossible to avoid doing so. If right now you were asked to write for five minutes on any subject and were asked to keep your writing completely value-free, you would probably find such an assignment difficult. Readers come to evaluative writing in part because they *seek* the opinions of other people for one reason or another.

Uses for Evaluation

Consider a time recently when you decided to watch a movie. There were at least two kinds of evaluation available to you through the media: the rating system and critical reviews.

Newspapers and magazines, radio and TV programs all provide critical evaluations for their readers and viewers. Many movie-goers consult more than one media reviewer to adjust for bias. Most movie-goers also consider the rating system, especially if they are deciding to take children to a movie. In addition, most people will also ask for recommendations from friends who have already seen the movie.

Whether professional or personal, judgments like these are based on the process of evaluation. The terminology associated with the elements of this process--criteria, evidence, and judgment--might seem alien to you, but you have undoubtedly used these elements almost every time you have expressed an opinion on something.

Types of Written Evaluation

Quite a few of the assignments writers are given at the university and in the workplace involve the process of evaluation.

Reviews

One type of written evaluation that most people are familiar with is the review. Reviewers will attend performances, events, or places (like restaurants, movies, or concerts), basing their evaluations on their observations. Reviewers typically use a particular set of criteria they establish for themselves, and their reviews most often appear in newspapers and magazines.

Critical Writing

Reviews are a type of critical writing, but there are other types of critical writing which focus on objects (like works of art or literature) rather than on events and performances. Literary criticism, for instance, is a way of establishing the worth or literary merit of a text on the basis of certain established criteria. When we write about literary texts, we do so using one of many critical "lenses," viewing the text as it addresses matters like form, culture, historical context, gender, and class (to name a few). Deciding whether a text is "good" or "bad" is a matter of establishing which "lens" you are viewing that text through, and using the appropriate set of criteria to do so. For example, we might say that a poem by an obscure Nineteenth Century African American poet is not "good" or "useful" in terms of formal characteristics like rhyme, meter, or diction, but we might judge that same text as "good" or "useful" in terms of the way it addresses cultural and political issues historically.

Response Essays

One very common type of academic writing is the response essay. In many different disciplines, we are asked to respond to something that we read or observe. Some types of response, like the *interpretive* response, simply ask us to explain a text. However, there are other types of response (like agree/disagree and *analytical* response) which demand that we make some sort of judgment based on careful consideration of the text, object, or event in question.

Problem Solving Essays

In writing assignments which focus on issues, policies, or phenomena, we are often asked to propose possible solutions for identifiable problems. This type of essay requires evaluation on two levels. First of all, it demands that we use evaluation in

order to determine that there is a legitimate problem. And secondly, it demands that we take more than one policy or solution into consideration to determine which will be the most feasible, viable, or effective one, given that problem.

Arguing Essays

Written argument is a type of evaluative writing, particularly when it focuses on a claim of value (like "The death penalty is cruel and ineffective") or policy claim (like "Oakland's Ebonics program is an effective way of addressing standard English deficiencies among African American students in public schools"). In written argument, we advance a claim like one of the above, then support this claim with solid reasons and evidence.

Process Analysis

In scientific or investigative writing, in which experiments are conducted and processes or phenomena are observed or studied, evaluation plays a part in the writer's discussion of findings. Often, these findings need to be both interpreted and analyzed by way of criteria established by the writer.

Source Evaluation

Although not a form of written evaluation in and of itself, source evaluation is a process that is involved in many other types of academic writing, like argument, investigative and scientific writing, and research papers. When we conduct research, we quickly learn that not every source is a good source and that we need to be selective about the quality of the evidence we transplant into our own writing.

Relevance to the Topic

When you conduct research, you naturally look for sources that are relevant to your topic. However, writers also often fall prey to the tendency to accept sources that are just relevant *enough*. For example, if you were writing an essay on Internet censorship, you might find that your research yielded quite a few sources on music censorship, art censorship, or censorship in general. Though these sources could possibly be marginally useful in an essay on Internet censorship, you will probably

want to find more directly relevant sources to serve a more central role in your essay.

Perspective on the Topic

Another point to consider is that even though you want sources *relevant* to your topic, you might not necessarily want an exclusive collection of sources which agree with your own perspective on that topic. For example, if you are writing an essay on Internet censorship from an anti-censorship perspective, you will want to include in your research sources which also address the pro-censorship side. In this way, your essay will be able to fully address perspectives other than (and sometimes in opposition to) your own.

Credibility

One of the questions you want to ask yourself when you consider using a source is "How credible will my audience consider this source to be?" You will want to ask this question not only of the source itself (the book, journal, magazine, newspaper, home page, etc.) but also of the author. To use an extreme example, for most academic writing assignments you would probably want to steer clear of using a source like the *National Enquirer* or like your eight year old brother, even though we could imagine certain writing situations in which such sources would be entirely appropriate. The key to determining the credibility of a source/author is to decide not only whether you think the source is reliable, but also whether your audience will find it so, given the purpose of your writing.

Currency of Publication

Unless you are doing research with an historical emphasis, you will generally want to choose sources which have been published recently. Sometimes research and statistics maintain their authority for a very long time, but the more common trend in most fields is that the more recent a study is, the more comprehensive and accurate it is.

Accessibility

When sorting through research, it is best to select sources that are readable and accessible both for you and for your intended audience. If a piece of writing is laden with incomprehensible jargon and incoherent structure or style, you will want to think twice about directing it toward an audience unfamiliar with that type of jargon, structure, or style. In short, it is a good rule of thumb to avoid using any source which you yourself do not understand and are not able to interpret for your audience.

Quality of Writing

When choosing sources, consider the quality of writing in the texts themselves. It is possible to paraphrase from sources that are sloppily written, but *quoting* from such a source would serve only to diminish your own credibility in the eyes of your audience.

Understanding of Biases

Few are sources are truly *objective* or *unbiased*. Trying to eliminate bias from your sources will be nearly impossible, but all writers can try to *understand* and *recognize* the biases of their sources. For instance, if you were doing a comparative study of 1 /2-ton pickup trucks on the market, you might consult the Ford home page. However, you would also need to be aware that this source would have some very definite biases. Likewise, it would not be unreasonable to use an article from *Catholic World* in an anti-abortion argument, but you would want to understand how your audience would be likely to view that source. Although there is no fail-proof way to determine the bias of a particular journal or newspaper, you can normally sleuth this out by looking at the language in the article itself or in the surrounding articles.

Use of Research

In evaluating a source, you will need to examine the sources that it in turn uses. Looking at the research used by the author of your source, what biases can you recognize? What are the quantity and quality of evidence and statistics included? How reliable and readable do the excerpts cited seem to be?

Considering Purpose and Audience

We typically think of "values" as being personal matters. But in our writing, as in other areas of our lives, values often become matters of public and political concern. Therefore, it is important when we evaluate to consider *why* we are making judgments on a subject (purpose) and *who* we hope to affect with our judgments (audience).

Purposes of Evaluation

Your purpose in written evaluation is not only to express your opinion or judgment about a subject, but also to convince, persuade, or otherwise influence an audience by way of that judgment. In this way, evaluation is a type of argument, in which you as a writer are attempting consciously to have an effect on your readers' ways of thinking or acting. If, for example, you are writing an evaluation in which you make a judgment that Mountain Bike A is a better buy than Mountain Bike B, you are doing more than expressing your approval of the merits of Bike A; you are attempting to convince your audience that Bike A is the better buy and, ultimately, to persuade them to buy Bike A rather than Bike B.

Effects of Audience

Kate Kiefer, English Professor

When we evaluate for ourselves, we don't usually take the time to articulate criteria and detail evidence. Our thought processes work fast enough that we often seem to make split-second decisions. Even when we spend time thinking over a decision--like which expensive toy (car, stereo, skis) to buy--we don't often lay out the criteria explicitly.

We can't take that shortcut when we write to other folks, though. If we want readers to accept our judgment, then we need to be clear about the criteria we use and the evidence that helps us determine value for each criterion. After all, why should I agree with you to eat at the Outback Steak House if you care only about cost but I care about taste and safe food handling? To write an effective evaluation, you need

to figure out what your readers care about and then match your criteria to their concerns. Similarly, you can overwhelm readers with too much detail when they don't have the background knowledge to care about that level of detail. Or you can ignore the expertise of your readers (at your peril) and not give enough detail. Then, as a writer, you come across as condescending, or worse.

So targeting an audience is really key to successful evaluation.

In written evaluation, it is important to keep in mind not only your own system of value, but also that of your audience. Writers do not evaluate in a vacuum. Giving some thought to the audience you are attempting to influence will help you to determine what criteria are important to them and what evidence they will require in order to be convinced or persuaded by your evaluative argument. In order to evaluate effectively, it is important that you consider what motivates and concerns your audience.

Criteria and Audience Considerations

The first step in deciding which criteria will be effective in your evaluation is determining which criteria your audience considers important. For example, if you are writing a review of a Mexican restaurant to an audience comprised mainly of senior citizens from the midwest, it is unlikely that "large portions" and "fiery green chile" will be the criteria most important to them. They might be more concerned, rather, with "quality of service" or "availability of heart smart menu items." Trying to anticipate and address your audience's values is an indispensable step in writing a persuasive evaluative argument.

Your next step in suiting your criteria to your audience is to determine how you will explain and/or defend not only your judgments, but the *criteria* supporting them as well. For example, if you are arguing that a Mexican restaurant is excellent because, among other reasons, the texture of the food is appealing, you might need to explain to your audience why texture is a significant criterion in evaluating Mexican food.

Evidence and Audience Considerations

The amount and type of evidence you use to support your judgments will depend largely on the demands of your audience. Common sense tells us that the more oppositional an audience is, the more evidence will be needed to convince them of the validity a judgment. For instance, if you were writing a favorable review of La Cocina on the basis of their fiery green chile, you might not need to use a great deal of evidence for an audience of people who like spicy food but have not tried any of the Mexican restaurants in town. However, if you are addressing an audience who is deeply devoted to the green chile at Manuel's, you will need to provide a fair amount of solid evidence in order to persuade them to try another restaurant.

Parts of an Evaluation

When we evaluate, we make an overall value claim about a subject, using criteria to make judgments based on evidence. Often, we also make use of comparison and contrast as strategies for determining the relative worth of the subject we are considering. This section examines these parts of an evaluation and shows how each functions in a successful evaluation.

Overall Claim

An overall claim or judgment is an evaluator's final decision about worth. When we evaluate, we make a general statement about the worth of objects, goods, services, or solutions to problems.

An overall claim or judgment in an evaluation can be as simple as "See this movie!" or "Brand X is a better buy than the name brand." It can also be complex, particularly when the evaluator recognizes certain conditions that affect the judgment: If citizens of our community want to improve air and water quality and are willing to forego 300 additional jobs, then we should not approve the new plant Acme is hoping to build here.

Qualifications

An overall claim or judgment usually requires qualification so that it seems balanced. If judgments are weighted too much to one side, they will sometimes mar

the credibility of your argument. If your overall judgment is wholly positive, your evaluation will wind up sounding like propaganda or advertisement. If it is wholly negative, you might present yourself as overly critical, unfair, or undiplomatic. An example of a qualified claim or judgment might be the following: Although La Cocina is not without its faults, it is the best Mexican restaurant in town.

Qualifications are almost always positive additions to evaluative arguments, but writers must learn not to overuse them. If you make too many qualifications, your audience will be unable to determine your final position on your subject, and you will appear to be "waffling."

Example Text

Creating more parking lots is a possible solution to the horrendous traffic congestion in Taiwan's major cities. When a new building permit is issued, each building must include a certain number of spaces for parking. However, new construction takes time, and results will be seen only as new buildings are erected. *This solution alone is inadequate for most of Taiwan's problem areas, which need a solution whose results will be noticed immediately.*

Comment

Notice how this sentence at the end of the paragraph seems to be a formal "thesis" or "claim" which might drive the rest of the essay. Based on this claim, we would assume that the remainder of the essay will deal with the reasons why the proposed policy along is "inadequate," and will address other possible solutions.

Supporting Judgments

In academic evaluations, the overall claim or judgment is backed up by smaller, more detailed judgments about aspects of a subject being evaluated. Supporting judgments function in the same way that "reasons" function in most arguments. They provide structure and justification for a more general claim. For example, if your overall claim or judgment in your evaluation is

"Although La Cocina is not without its faults, it is the best Mexican restaurant in town,"

one supporting judgment might be

"La Cocina's green chile is superb."

This judgment would be based on criteria you have established, and it would be supported by evidence.

Example Text

Providing more parking spaces near buildings is not the only act necessary to solve Taiwan's parking problems. *A combination of more parking spaces, increased fines, and lowered traffic volume may be necessary to eliminate the nightmare of driving in the cities.* In fact, until laws are enforced and fines increased, no number of new parking spaces will impact the congestion seen in downtown areas.

Comment

There are arguably three supporting judgments being made here, as three possible solutions are being suggested to rectify this problem of parking in Taiwan. If we were reading these supporting judgments at the beginning of an essay, we would expect the essay to discuss them in depth, pointing out evidence that these proposed solutions would be effective.

Criteria

When we write evaluations, we consciously adopt certain standards of measurement, or *criteria*.

Criteria can be concrete standards, like size or speed, or can be abstract, like practicality. When we write evaluations in an academic context, we typically avoid using criteria that are wholly personal, and rely instead on those that are less

"subjective" and more likely to be shared by the majority of the audience we are addressing. Choosing appropriate criteria often involves careful consideration of audience demands, values, and concerns.

As an evaluator, you will sometimes discover that you will need to explain and/or defend *not only* your judgments, but also the criteria informing those judgments. For example, if you are arguing that a Mexican restaurant is excellent because (among other reasons) the texture of the food is appealing, you might need to explain to your audience why texture is a significant criterion in evaluating Mexican food.

Types of Criteria

If you are evaluating a concrete canoe for an engineering class, you will use concrete criteria such as float time, cost of materials, hydrodynamic design, and so on. If you are evaluating the suitability of a textbook for a history class, you will probably rely on more abstract criteria such as readability, length, and controversial vs. mainstream interpretation of history.

In evaluation, we often rely on *concrete*, measurable standards according to which subjects (usually objects) may be evaluated. For example, cars may be evaluated according to the criteria of size, speed, or cost.

Many academic evaluations, however, don't focus on objects that we can measure in terms of size, speed, or cost. Rather, they look at somewhat more abstract concepts (problems and solutions often), which we might measure in terms of "effectiveness," "feasibility," or other *abstract* criteria. When writing this kind of evaluation, it is vital to be as clear as possible when articulating, defining, and using your criteria, since not all readers are likely to understand and agree with these criteria as readily as they would understand and agree with concrete criteria.

Related Information: Abstract Criteria

Abstract criteria are not easily measurable, and they are usually less self-evident, more in need of definition, than concrete criteria. Even though criteria may be abstract, they should not be imprecise. Always state your criteria as

clearly and precisely as possible.

"Feasibility" is one example of an abstract criterion that a writer might use to evaluate a solution to a problem. Feasibility is the degree of likelihood of success of something like a plan of action or a solution to a problem.

"Capability of being implemented" is a way to look at feasibility in terms of solutions to problems. The relative ease with which a solution would be adopted is sometimes a way to look at feasibility.

The following example mentions directly the criteria it is using (the words in italics).

Fire prevention should be the major consideration of a family building a home. By using concrete, the risk of fire is significantly decreased. But that is not all that concrete provides. It is *affordable*, *suitable for all climates*, and *helps reduce deforestation*. Since all of these factors are important, concrete should be demanded more than it is, and it should certainly be used more than wood for homebuilding.

Related Information: Concrete Criteria

Concrete criteria are measurable standards which most people are likely to understand and (usually) to agree with. For example, a person might make use of criteria like "size," "speed," and "cost" when buying a car.

Size

If size is your main criterion, and something with a larger size will receive a more favorable evaluation.

Speed

If size is your main criterion, and something with a larger size will receive a more favorable evaluation.

Cost

Perhaps the only quality that you desire in a car is low initial cost. You don't need to take into account anything else. In this case, you can put judgments on these three cars in the local used car lot:

Nissan	\$1,000
Toyota	\$1,200
Saab	\$3,000

Because the Nissan has the lowest initial price, it receives the most favorable judgment. The evidence is found on the price tag. Each car is compared by way of a single criterion: cost.

Using Clear and Well-defined Criteria

When we evaluate informally (passing judgments during the course of conversation, for instance), we typically assume that our criteria are self-evident and require no explanation. However, in written evaluation, it is often necessary that we clarify and define our criteria in order to make a persuasive evaluative argument.

Criteria That Are Too Vague or Personal

Although we frequently find ourselves needing to use abstract criteria like "feasibility" or "effectiveness," we also must avoid using criteria that are overly vague or personal and difficult to support with evidence. As evaluators, we must steer clear of criteria that are matters of taste, belief, or personal preference. For example, the "best" lamp might simply be the one that you think looks prettiest in your home. If you depend on a criterion like "pretty in my home," and neglect to use

more common, shared criteria like "brightness," "cost," and "weight," you are probably relying on a criterion that is too specific to your own personal preferences. To make "pretty in my home" an effective criterion, you would need to explain what "pretty in my home" means and how it might relate to other people's value systems. (For example: "Lamp A is attractive because it is an unoffensive style and color that would be appropriate for many people's decorating tastes.")

Using Criteria Based on the Appropriate "Class" of Subjects

When you make judgments, it is important that you use criteria that are appropriate to the type of object, person, policy, etc. that you are examining. If you are evaluating Steven Spielberg's film, Schindler's List, for instance, it is unfair to criticize it because it isn't a knee-slapper. Because "Schindler's List" is a drama and not a comedy, using the criterion of "humor" is inappropriate.

Weighing Criteria

Once you have established criteria for your evaluation of a subject, it is necessary to decide which of these criteria are most important. For example, if you are evaluating a Mexican restaurant and you have arrived at several criteria (variety of items on the menu, spiciness of the food, size of the portions, decor, and service), you need to decide which of these criteria are most critical to your evaluation. If the size of the portions is good, but the service is bad, can you give the restaurant a good rating? What about if the decor is attractive, but the food is bland? Once you have placed your criteria in a hierarchy of importance, it is much easier to make decisions like these.

Criteria and Audience Considerations

When we evaluate, we must consider the audience we hope to influence with our judgments. This is particularly true when we decide which criteria are informing (and should inform) these judgments.

After establishing some criteria for your evaluation, it is important to ask yourself whether or not your audience is likely to accept those criteria. It is crucial that they do accept the criteria if, in turn, you expect them to accept the supporting judgments and overall claim or judgment built on them.

Related Information: Explaining and Defending Criteria

In deciding which criteria will be effective in your evaluation is determining which criteria your audience considers important. For example, if you are writing a review of a Mexican restaurant to an audience comprised mainly of senior citizens from the midwest, it is unlikely that "large portions" and "fiery green chile" will be the criteria most important to them. They might be more concerned, rather, with "quality of service" or "availability of heart smart menu items." Trying to anticipate and address your audience's values is an indispensable step in writing a persuasive evaluative argument.

Related Information: Understanding Audience Criteria

In deciding which criteria will be effective in your evaluation is determining which criteria your audience considers important. For example, if you are writing a review of a Mexican restaurant to an audience comprised mainly of senior citizens from the midwest, it is unlikely that "large portions" and "fiery green chile" will be the criteria most important to them. They might be more concerned, rather, with "quality of service" or "availability of heart smart menu items." Trying to anticipate and address your audience's values is an indispensable step in writing a persuasive evaluative argument.

How Background Experience Influences Criteria

Laura Thomas - Composition Lecturer

Your background experience influences the criteria that you use in evaluation. If

you know a lot about something, you will have a good idea of what criteria should govern your judgments. On the other hand, it's hard if you don't know *enough* about what you're judging. Sometimes you have to research first in order to come up with useful criteria. For example, I recently went shopping for a new pair of skis for the first time in fifteen years. When I began shopping, I realized that I didn't even know what questions to ask anymore. The last time I had bought skis, you judged them according to whether they had a foam core or a wood core. But I had no idea what the important considerations were anymore.

Evidence

Evidence consists of the specifics you use to reach your conclusion or judgment. For example, if you judge that "La Cocina's green chile is superb" on the basis of the criterion, "Good green chile is so fiery that you can barely eat it," you might offer evidence like the following:

"I drank an entire pitcher of water on my own during the course of the meal."

or

"Though my friend wouldn't admit that the chile was challenging for him, I saw beads of sweat form on his brow."

Related Information: Example Text

In the following paragraph, evidence appears in italics. Note that the reference to the *New York Times* backs up the evidence offered in the previous sentence:

Since killer whales have small lymphatic systems, they catch infections more easily when held captive (*Obee 23*). The orca from the movie "Free Willy," *Keiko, developed a skin disorder because the water he was living in was not cold enough*. This infection was a result of the combination of tank conditions and the animal's immune system, *according to a New York Times article*.

Types of Evidence

Evidence for academic evaluations is usually of two types: concrete detail and analytic detail. Analytic detail comes from critical thinking about abstract elements of the thing being evaluated. It will also include quotations from experts. Concrete detail comes from sense perceptions and measurements--facts about color, speed, size, texture, smell, taste, and so on. Concrete details are more likely to support concrete criteria (as opposed to abstract criteria) used in judging objects. Analytic detail will more often support abstract criteria (as opposed to concrete criteria), like the criterion "feasibility," discussed in the section on criteria. Analytic detail also appears most often in academic evaluations of solutions to problems, although such solutions can also sometimes be evaluated according to concrete criteria.

What Kinds of Evidence Work

Good evidence ranges from personal experience to interviews with experts to published sources. The kind of evidence that works best for you will depend on your audience and often on the writing assignment you have been given.

Evidence and Audience Considerations

The amount and type of evidence you use to support your judgments will depend largely on the demands of your audience. Common sense tells us that the more oppositional an audience is, the more evidence will be needed to convince them of the validity a judgment. For instance, if you were writing a favorable review of La Cocina on the basis of their fiery green chile, you might not need to use a great deal of evidence for an audience of people who like spicy food but have not tried any of the Mexican restaurants in town. However, if you are addressing an audience who is deeply devoted to the green chile at Manuel's, you will need to provide a fair amount of solid evidence in order to persuade them to try another restaurant.

Evidence and the Writing Assignment

When you choose evidence to support the judgments you are making in an evaluation, it will be important to consider what type of evaluation you are being

asked to do. If, for instance, you are being asked to review a play you have attended, your evidence will most likely consist primarily of your own observations. However, if your assignment asks you to compare and contrast two potential national health care policies (toward deciding which is the better one), your evidence will need to be more statistical, more dependent on reputable sources, and more directed toward possible effects or outcomes of your judgment.

Comparison and Contrast

Comparison and contrast is the process of positioning an item or concept being evaluated among other like items or concepts. We are all familiar with this technique as it's used in the marketing of products: soft drink "taste tests," comparisons of laundry detergent effectiveness, and the like. It is a way of determining the value of something *in relation* to comparable things. For example, if you have made the judgment that "La Cocina's green chile is superb" and you have offered evidence of the spiciness and the flavor of the chile, you might also use comparison by giving your audience a scale on which to base judgment: "La Cocina's chile is even more fiery and flavorful than Manuel's, which is by no means a walk in the park."

Related Information: Example Text

In this case, the writer compares limestone with wood to show that limestone is a better building material. Although this comparison could be developed much more, it still begins to point out the relative merits of limestone.

Concrete is a feasible substitute for wood as a building material. Concrete comes from a rock called limestone. Limestone is found all over the United States. *By using limestone instead of wood, the dependence on dwindling forest reserves would decrease. There are more sedimentary rocks than there are forests left in this country, and they are more evenly distributed.* For this reason, it is quite possible to switch from wood to concrete as the primary building material for residential construction.

Determining Relative Worth

Comparing and contrasting rarely means placing the item or concept being evaluated in relation to another item or concept that is obviously grossly inferior. For instance, if you are attempting to demonstrate the value of a Cannondale mountain bike, it would be foolish to compare it with a Huffy. However, it would be useful to compare it with a Klein, arguably a similar bicycle. In this type of maneuver, you are not comparing good with bad; rather, you are deciding which bike is better and which bike is worse. In order to determine relative worth in this way, you will need to be very careful in defining the criteria you are using to make the comparison.

Using Comparison and Contrast Effectively

In order to make comparison and contrast function well in evaluation, it is necessary to be attentive to: 1) focusing on the item or concept under consideration and 2) the use of evidence in comparison and contrast.

When using comparison and contrast, writers must remember that they are using comparable items or concepts *only* as a way of demonstrating the worth of the main item or concept under consideration. It is easy to lose focus when using this technique, because of the temptation to evaluate two (or more) items or concepts rather than just the one under consideration.

It is important to remember that judgments made on the basis of comparison and contrast need to be supported with evidence. It is not enough to assert that "La Cocina's chile is even more fiery and flavorful than Manuel's." It will be necessary to support this judgment with evidence, showing *in what ways* La Cocina's chile is more flavorful: "Manuel's chile relies heavily on a tomato base, giving it an Italian flavor. La Cocina follows a more traditional recipe which uses little tomato and instead flavors the chile with shredded pork, a dash of vinegar, and a bit of red chile to give it a piquant taste."

The Process of Writing an Evaluation

A variety of writing assignments call for evaluation. Bearing in mind the various approaches that might be demanded by those particular assignments, this section offers some general strategies for formulating a written evaluation.

Choosing a Topic for Evaluation

Sometimes your topic for evaluation will be dictated by the writing assignment you have been given. Other times, though, you will be required to choose your own topic. Common sense tells you that it is best to choose something about which you already have a base knowledge. For instance, if you are a skier, you might want to evaluate a particular model of skis. In addition, it is best to choose something that is tangible, observable, and/or researchable. For example, if you chose a topic like "methods of sustainable management of forests," you would know that there would be research to support your evaluation. Likewise, if you chose to evaluate a film like *Pulp Fiction*, you could rent the video and watch it several times in order to get the evidence you needed. However, you would have fewer options if you were to choose an abstract concept like "loyalty" or "faith." When evaluating, it is usually best to steer clear of abstractions like these as much as possible.

Brainstorming Possible Judgments

Once you have chosen a topic, you might begin your evaluation by thinking about what you already know about the topic. In doing this, you will be coming up with possible judgments to include in your evaluation. Begin with a tentative overall judgment or claim. Then decide what supporting judgments you might make to back that claim. Keep in mind that your judgments will likely change as you collect evidence for your evaluation.

Determining a Tentative Overall Judgment

Start by making an overall judgment on the topic in question, based on what you already know. For instance, if you were writing an evaluation of sustainable management practices in forestry, your tentative overall judgment might be: "Sustainable management is a viable way of dealing with deforestation in old growth forests."

Brainstorming Possible Supporting Judgments

With a tentative overall judgment in mind, you can begin to brainstorm judgments (or reasons) that could support your overall judgment by asking the question, "Why?" For example, asking "Why?" of the tentative overall judgment "Sustainable management is a viable way of dealing with deforestation in old growth forests" might yield the following supporting judgments:

- Sustainable management allows for continued support of the logging industry.
- It eliminates much unnecessary waste.
- It is much better for the environment than unrestricted, traditional forestry methods.
- It is less expensive than these traditional methods.

Anticipating Changes to Your Judgments After Collecting Evidence

When brainstorming possible judgments this early in the writing process, it is necessary to keep an open mind as you enter into the stage in which you collect evidence. Once you have done observations, analysis, or research, you might find that you are unable to advance your tentative overall judgment. Or you might find that some of the supporting judgments you came up with are not true or are not supportable. Your findings might also point you toward *other* judgments you can make in addition to the ones you are already making.

Defining Criteria

To prepare to organize and write your evaluation, it is important to clearly define the criteria you are using to make your judgments. These criteria govern the direction of the evaluation and provide structure and justification for the judgments you make.

Looking at the Criteria Informing Your Judgments (Working Backwards)

We often work backwards from the judgments we make, discovering what criteria we are using on the basis of what our judgments look like. For instance, our tentative judgments about sustainable management practices are as follows:

- Sustainable management allows for continued support of the logging industry.
- It eliminates much unnecessary waste.
- It is much better for the environment than unrestricted, traditional forestry methods.
- It is less expensive than these traditional methods.

If we were to analyze these judgments, asking ourselves why we made them, we would see that we used the following criteria: wellbeing of the logging industry, conservation of resources, wellbeing of the environment, and cost.

Thinking of Additional Criteria

Once you have identified the criteria informing your initial judgments, you will want to determine what other criteria should be included in your evaluation. For example, in addition to the criteria you've already come up with (wellbeing of the logging industry, conservation of resources, wellbeing of the environment, and cost), you might include the criterion of preservation of the old growth forests.

Comparing Your Criteria with Those of Your Audience

In deciding which criteria are most important to include in your evaluation, it is necessary to consider the criteria your audience is likely to find important. Let's say we are directing our evaluation of sustainable management methods toward an audience of loggers. If we look at our list of criteria--wellbeing of the logging industry, conservation of resources, wellbeing of the environment, cost, and preservation of the old growth forests--we might decide that wellbeing of the logging industry and cost are the criteria most important to loggers. At this point, we would also want to identify additional criteria the audience might expect us to address: perhaps feasibility, labor requirements, and efficiency.

Deciding Which Criteria Are Most Important

Once you have developed a long list of possible criteria for judging your subject (in this case, sustainable management methods), you will need to narrow the list, since it is impractical and ineffective to use of *all* possible criteria in your essay. To decide which criteria to address, determine which are least dispensable, both to you and to your audience.

Your own criteria were: wellbeing of the logging industry, conservation of resources, wellbeing of the environment, cost, and preservation of the old growth forests.

Those you anticipated for your audience were: feasibility, labor requirements, and efficiency.

In the written evaluation, you might choose to address those criteria most important to your audience, with a couple of your own included. For example, your list of indispensable criteria might look like this: wellbeing of the logging industry, cost, labor requirements, efficiency, conservation of resources, and preservation of the old growth forests.

Criteria and Assumptions

Stephen Reid, English Professor

Warrants (to use a term from argumentation) come on the scene when we ask why a given criterion should be used or should be acceptable in evaluating the particular text, product, or performance in question. When we ask WHY a particular criterion should be important (let's say, strong performance in an automobile engine, quickly moving plot in a murder mystery, outgoing personality in a teacher), we are getting at the assumptions (i.e., the warrant) behind why the data is relevant to the claim of value we are about to make. Strong performance in an automobile engine might be a positive criterion in an urban, industrialized environment, where traveling at highway speeds on American interstates is important. But we might disagree about whether strong performance (accompanied by lower mileage) might be important in a rural European environment where gas costs are several dollars a litre. Similarly, an outgoing personality for a teacher might be an important standard of judgment or criterion in a teacher-centered classroom, but we could imagine another kind of decentered class where interpersonal skills are more important than teacher personality. By QUESTIONING the validity and appropriateness of a given criterion in a particular situation, we are probing for the ASSUMPTIONS or WARRANTS we are making in using that criterion in that particular situation. Thus, criteria are important, but it is often equally important for writers to discuss the assumptions that they are making in choosing the major criteria in their evaluations.

Collecting Evidence

Once you have established the central criteria you will use in our evaluation, you will investigate your subject in terms of these criteria. In order to investigate the subject of sustainable management methods, you would more than likely have to research whether these methods stand up to the criteria you have established: wellbeing of the logging industry, cost, labor requirements, time efficiency, conservation of resources, and preservation of the old growth forests. However, library research is only one of the techniques evaluators use. Depending on the type of evaluation being made, the evaluator might use such methods as observation, field research, and analysis.

Thinking About What You Already Know

The best place to start looking for evidence is with the knowledge you already possess. To do this, you might try brainstorming, clustering, or freewriting ideas.

Library Research

When you are evaluating policies, issues, or products, you will usually need to conduct library research to find the evidence your evaluation requires. It is always a good idea to check journals, databases, and bibliographies relevant to your subject when you begin research. It is also helpful to speak with a reference librarian about how to get started.

Observation

When you are asked to evaluate a performance, event, place, object, or person, one of the best methods available is simple observation. What makes observation not so simple is the need to focus on criteria you have developed ahead of time. If, for instance, you are reviewing a student production of *Hamlet*, you will want to review your list of criteria (perhaps quality of acting, costumes, faithfulness to the text, set design, lighting, and length of time before intermission) before attending the play. During or after the play, you will want to take as many notes as possible, keeping these criteria in mind.

Field Research

To expand your evaluation beyond your personal perspective or the perspective of your sources, you might conduct your own *field research*. Typical field research techniques include interviewing, taking a survey, administering a questionnaire, and conducting an experiment. These methods can help you support your judgment and can sometimes help you determine whether or not your judgment is valid.

Analysis

When you are asked to evaluate a text, analysis is often the technique you will use in collecting evidence. If you are analyzing an argument, you might use the Toulmin Method. Other texts might not require such a structured analysis but might be better addressed by more general critical reading strategies.

Applying Criteria

After developing a list of indispensable criteria, you will need to "test" the subject according to these criteria. At this point, it will probably be necessary to collect evidence (through research, analysis, or observation) to determine, for example, whether sustainable management methods would hold up to the criteria you have established: wellbeing of the logging industry, cost, labor requirements, efficiency, conservation of resources, and preservation of the old growth forests. One way of recording the results of this "test" is by putting your notes in a three-column log.

Organizing the Evaluation

One of the best ways to organize your information in preparation for writing is to construct an informal outline of sorts. Outlines might be arranged according to criteria, comparison and contrast, chronological order, or causal analysis. They also might follow what Robert K. Miller and Suzanne S. Webb refer to in their book, *Motives for Writing* (2nd ed.) as "the pattern of classical oration for evaluations" (286). In addition to deciding on a general structure for your evaluation, it will be necessary to determine the most appropriate placement for your overall claim or judgment.

Placement of the Overall Claim or Judgment

Writers can state their final position at the beginning or the end of an essay. The same is true of the overall claim or judgment in a written evaluation.

When you place your overall claim or judgment at the end of your written evaluation, you are able to build up to it and to demonstrate how your evaluative argument (evidence, explanation of criteria, etc.) has led to that judgment.

Writers of academic evaluations normally don't need to keep readers in suspense about their judgments. By stating the overall claim or judgment early in the paper, writers help readers both to see the structure of the essay and to accept the evidence as convincing proof of the judgment. (Writers of evaluations should remember, of course, that there is no rule against stating the overall claim or judgment at both the beginning and the end of the essay.)

Organization by Criteria

The following is an example from Stephen Reid's *The Prentice Hall Guide for College Writers* (4th ed.), showing how a writer might arrange an evaluation according to criteria:

Introductory paragraphs: *information* about the restaurant (location, hours, prices), general *description* of Chinese restaurants today, and *overall claim*: The Hunan Dynasty is reliable, a good value, and versatile.

Criterion # 1/Judgment: Good restaurants should have an attractive setting and atmosphere/Hunan Dynasty is attractive.

Criterion # 2/Judgment: Good restaurants should give strong priority to service/ Hunan Dynasty has, despite an occasional glitch, expert service.

Criterion # 3/Judgment: Restaurants that serve modestly priced food should have quality main dishes/ Main dishes at Hunan Dynasty are generally good but not often memorable. (Note: The most important criterion--the quality of the main dishes--is saved for last.)

Concluding paragraphs: Hunan Dynasty is a top-flight neighborhood restaurant (338).

Organization by Comparison and Contrast

Sometimes comparison and contrast is not merely a strategy used in part [italics] of an evaluation, but is the strategy governing the organization of the entire essay.

The following are examples from Stephen Reid's *The Prentice Hall Guide for College Writers* (4th ed.), showing two ways that a writer might organize an evaluation according to comparison and contrast.

Introductory paragraph(s)

Thesis [or overall claim/judgment]: Although several friends recommended the Yakitori, we preferred the Unicorn for its more authentic atmosphere, courteous service, and well-prepared food. [Notice that the criteria are stated in this thesis.]

Authentic atmosphere: Yakitori vs. Unicorn

Courteous service: Yakitori vs. Unicorn

Well-prepared food: Yakitori vs. Unicorn

Concluding paragraph(s) (Reid 339)

Introductory paragraph(s)

Thesis [or overall claim/judgment]: Although several friends recommended the Yakitori, we preferred the Unicorn for its more authentic atmosphere, courteous service, and well-prepared food. [Notice that the criteria are stated in this thesis.]

The Yakitori: atmosphere, service, and food

The Unicorn: atmosphere, service, and food as compared to the Yakitori

Concluding paragraph(s) (Reid 339).

Organization by Chronological Order

Writers often follow chronological order when evaluating or reviewing events or performances. This method of organization allows the writer to evaluate portions of the event or performance in the order in which it happens.

Organization by Causal Analysis

When using analysis to evaluate places, objects, events, or policies, writers often focus on causes or effects. The following is an example from Stephen Reid's *The Prentice Hall Guide for College Writers* (4th ed.), showing how one writer organizes an evaluation of a Goya painting by discussing its effects on the viewer.

Criterion #1/Judgment: The iconography, or use of symbols, contributes to the powerful effect of this picture on the viewer.

Evidence: The church as a symbol of hopefulness contrasts with the cruelty of the execution. The spire on the church emphasizes for the viewer how powerless the Church is to save the victims.

Criterion #2/Judgment: The use of light contributes to the powerful effect of the picture on the viewer.

Evidence: The light casts an intense glow on the scene, and its glaring, lurid, and artificial qualities create the same effect on the viewer that modern art sometimes does.

Criterion #3/Judgment: The composition or use of formal devices contributes to the powerful effect of the picture on the viewer.

Evidence: The diagonal lines scissors the picture into spaces that give the viewer a claustrophobic feeling. The corpse is foreshortened, so that it looks as though the dead man is bidding the viewer welcome (Reid 340).

Pattern of Classical Oration for Evaluations

Robert K. Miller and Suzanne S. Webb, in their book, *Motives for Writing* (2nd ed.) discuss what they call "the pattern of classical oration for evaluations," which

incorporates opposing evaluations as well as supporting reasons and judgments. This pattern is as follows:

Present your subject. (This discussion includes any background information, description, acknowledgement of weaknesses, and so forth.)

State your criteria. (If your criteria are controversial, be sure to justify them.)

Make your judgment. (State it as clearly and emphatically as possible.)

Give your reasons. (Be sure to present good evidence for each reason.)

Refute opposing evaluations. (Let your reader know you have given thoughtful consideration to opposing views, since such views exist.)

State your conclusion. (You may restate or summarize your judgment.) (Miller and Webb 286-7)

Example: Part of an Outline for an Evaluation

The following is a portion of an outline for an evaluation, organized by way of supporting judgments or reasons. Notice that this pattern would need to be repeated (using criteria other than the fieriness of the green chile) in order to constitute a complete evaluation proving that "Although La Cocina is not without its faults, it is the best Mexican restaurant in town."

Evaluation of La Cocina, a Mexican Restaurant

Intro Paragraph Leading to Overall Judgment: "Although La Cocina is not without its faults, it is the best Mexican restaurant in town."

Supporting Judgment: "La Cocina's green chile is superb."

Criterion used to make this judgment: "Good green chile is so fiery that you can barely eat it."

Evidence in support of this judgment: "I drank an entire pitcher of water on my own during the course of the meal" or "Though my friend wouldn't admit that the chile was challenging for him, I saw beads of sweat form on his brow."

Supporting Judgment made by way of Comparison and Contrast: "La Cocina's chile is even more fiery and flavorful than Manuel's, which is by no means a walk in the park itself."

Evidence in support of this judgment: "Manuel's chile relies heavily on a tomato base, giving it an Italian flavor. La Cocina follows a more traditional recipe which uses little tomato, and instead flavors the chile with shredded pork, a dash of vinegar, and a bit of red chile to give it a piquant taste."

Writing the Draft

If you have an outline to follow, writing a draft of a written evaluation is simple. Stephen Reid, in his *Prentice Hall Guide for College Writers*, recommends that writers maintain focus on both the audience they are addressing and the central criteria they want to include. Such a focus will help writers remember what their audience expects and values and what is most important in constructing an effective and persuasive evaluation.

Guidelines for Revision

In his *Prentice Hall Guide for College Writers*, 4th ed., Stephen Reid offers some helpful tips for revising written evaluations. These guidelines are reproduced here and grouped as follows:

Examining Criteria

Criteria are standards of value . They contain categories and judgments, as in "good fuel economy," "good reliability," or "powerful use of light and shade in painting." Some categories, such as "price," have clearly implied judgments ("low price"), but make sure that your criteria refer implicitly or explicitly to a standard of value.

Examine your criteria from your audience's point of view. Which criteria are most important in evaluating your subject? Will your readers agree that the criteria you select are indeed the most important ones? Will changing the order in which you present your criteria make your evaluation more convincing? (Reid 342)

Balancing the Evaluation

Include both positive and negative evaluations of your subject. If all of your judgments are positive, your evaluation will sound like an advertisement. If all of your judgments are negative, your readers may think you are too critical (Reid 342).

Using Evidence

Be sure to include supporting evidence for each criterion. Without any data or support, your evaluation will be just an opinion that will not persuade your reader.

If you need additional evidence to persuade your readers, [go back to the "Collecting" stage of this process] (Reid 343).

Avoiding Overgeneralization

Avoid overgeneralizing your claims. If you are evaluating only three software programs, you cannot say that Lotus 1-2-3 is the best business program around. You can say only that it is the best among the group or the best in the particular class that you measured (Reid 343).

Making Appropriate Comparisons

Unless your goal is humor or irony, compare subjects that belong in the same class. Comparing a Yugo to a BMW is absurd because they are not similar cars in terms of cost, design, or purpose (Reid 343).

Checking for Accuracy

If you are citing other people's data or quoting sources, check to make sure your summaries and data are accurate (Reid 343).

Working on Transitions, Clarity, and Style

Signal the major divisions in your evaluation to your reader using clear transitions, key words, and paragraph hooks. At the beginning of new paragraphs or sections of your essay, let your reader know where you are going.

Revise sentences for directness and clarity.

Edit your evaluation for correct spelling, appropriate word choice, punctuation, usage, and grammar (343).

Citation: Please adapt for your documentation style.

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