

What is evidence in literary studies?

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You're taking an English class and your instructor asks you to write a paper that makes an argument about one of your class readings.

The assignment also says that you need to include plenty of evidence.

But, what is evidence in literary studies, and where does it come from?

Evidence is information that you can use to support an argument, which is the main claim you are making in your paper.

Because literary studies is focused on closely reading and analyzing written texts (or, sometimes, the rhetorical aspects of visual media), the most important type of evidence is quotations and paraphrases from the text you are analyzing.

For example, let's take a look at the theme song from the popular children's TV show, Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood. If you were writing a paper analyzing the lyrics of this song, you could claim that the song discusses neighborhoods to teach children to appreciate and value the people in their lives and their communities.

To support your claim, you will need to find evidence consisting of examples from the lyrics. One example would be the quote, "I have always wanted to have a neighbor just like you / I've always wanted to live in a neighborhood with you" because in this quote, Mr. Rogers expresses appreciation of other people and the value of communities.

In this example, you find evidence to support your argument from the text itself.

There are also other types of evidence that can be used to support your argument such as insights and viewpoints from other people who have read the same text that you are reading. This kind of evidence can be found in scholarly articles or books.

Another type of evidence that may be useful is background information to provide context about the historical, political, or cultural setting of the text you are reading. Dictionaries, encyclopedias, and sometimes news articles can provide this kind of evidence.

In our example of analyzing the Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood theme song, you could include evidence from an encyclopedia article about the show's creator, Fred Rogers, to show how his life experiences outside of his work might have contributed to the values he taught in his TV series.

You could also use information you find in a scholarly article about children's literature to provide evidence about how Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood might have been similar to or different from other media created for children at the time when the TV show began.

Scholarly and background evidence put your claims into context.

They help your reader understand how the quotes and paraphrases you've chosen from the main text you are analyzing are important and relevant to the argument of your paper.

If you have any questions about what type of evidence is most appropriate for your assignment, consult with your instructor. For research questions about finding sources of evidence, you can contact UH Libraries. We're here to help!