

## **Use of Evidence: Explanation of Outcome (a)**

(Slide 1) The first lecture in this unit addressed the concept of evidence. This lecture explains the first of the four learning outcomes related to the use of evidence. The next lecture gives several short examples that illustrate the ideas presented in this lecture

(Slide 2) This lecture will address the following learning outcome:

- 2) Use of Evidence
  - a) Describe the evidence adduced by an author

It's maybe worthwhile looking at the next couple of outcomes as well, even though they won't be addressed in this lecture:

- b) Describe the means used for treating evidence
- c) Draw inferences from graphs, tables, and other graphical representations of quantitative evidence
- d) Determine the nature of textual sources referenced in a text and estimate the reliability of the source in the given context

Outcome (b) builds on outcome (a), and both are basic skills that you'll use throughout your college education and beyond.

(Slide 3) The last lecture explained that a fact is only evidence when put in the context of an argument. In that sense, it is the same thing as what is more commonly known as a "premise," namely, the part of the argument from which the conclusion follows. That lecture also addressed the three basic sources of knowledge: direct sense perception, reports from others, and the third source is what is called, unfortunately since it's a Latin term, *a priori* knowledge. This is a practical course on critical thinking, not a philosophical course on the sources and nature of knowledge, so we won't spend too much time on this distinction, but it's important to mention it because the skill of using evidence in developing and assessing arguments in principle applies to all kinds of evidence.

(Slide 4) Since in this course we are focusing primarily on thinking critically about arguments that are presented to you in written form, we'll be focusing primarily on evidence acquired by report. Put more simply, for the most part you'll be thinking about evidence that other people present in the course of developing their arguments. You'll identify and describe the evidence that they adduce, describe how they use it in their arguments, and judge the reliability of evidence.

(Slide 5) Let's just focus on the first outcome for now, though, namely describing the evidence adduced by an author. What does describe mean in this context? Well, what would you do if you were asked to describe a person? Your first inclination might be to describe the person physically, what he or she looks like. So you'd give the person's height, body type, skin, eye, and hair color, things like that. Or you

might start with personality: what kind of person is he or she? In that case you'd probably make use of standard types that everyone would recognize; to use the types from movie *The Breakfast Club* as an example, is the person a brain, an athlete, a basket case, a princess, or a criminal?

(Slide 6) We can conclude two things from these examples: first that an outcome requiring description calls for a typology, a way of characterizing people or evidence or whatever it is you're describing. Second, there's not just one typology that you're forced to use in practicing this skill; there are many, which you will have to either choose from (if a list is available) or create otherwise. It may be helpful to compare this to the first outcome in the last unit, namely summarizing the explicit content of a text:

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|--|----------------------------|
| (1a) Summarize the explicit content of a text.   | (Critical Reading outcome) |
| (2a) Describe the evidence adduced by an author. | (Evidence outcome)         |

If you'll recall, there are different levels at which a text can be summarized. You can provide a summary that's just a few sentences, where you identify the main argument that runs through a text, and maybe a couple of the main points like subsidiary arguments or the scholarly context (claims made by other people which the author is seeking to refute). At the other extreme, you can produce a detailed summary that identifies more or less all of the arguments contained in a text. A short summary of a book, of the type you saw excerpted in the last unit, might have one word per page of the book, whereas a detailed summary of a scholarly paper might be 10% the size the paper being summarized. Regardless, a summary is always comprehensive, given the level at which it operates: if a summary is just one sentence, then it encompasses the main idea of the text. If it's one level more complete, then it'll get all the next most important arguments as well, those that directly support the main argument, and so on for greater levels of detail.

(Slide 7) In contrast, outcome (2a) isn't comprehensive in the same way. In order to describe evidence, you don't produce a list: you produce a characterization. The summary of a text is closely tied to, and derived from, the text that's being summarized. The explicit elements of content are, as it were, right there for the reader to pluck out. The person producing a summary has some freedom in deciding how to present that content, but that's about where the capacity for creativity stops. In contrast, in producing a description you first have to decide what aspect of the thing that you're describing you want to address, and what you pick might be something that's there for the world to see, like physical appearance, or it might be something hidden, like personality. It can take quite a long time to get to know someone's personality, and two people who know a third person might characterize his personality very differently. The third learning goal for this course has to do with perspective and bias, but it's worth mentioning now that perspective can enter into descriptions in a way that it doesn't enter into explicit summaries. This will probably become more clear as we consider examples, and that is precisely what the next lecture attempts to do.

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