Analyzing and Evaluating Evidence

This handout demonstrates how to use the summary of an article to make your critique of the evidence more effective.

As we saw in “Writing a Summary Paragraph,” the goal of the summary is to present the article’s main points clearly, and show how those points all add up to the article’s thesis. Doing that gives you a solid foundation for analyzing the evidence, because you can now explain how individual facts and examples relate to individual points, without losing sight of the overall argument.

I will use “Race and the Drug War” (Cockburn and St. Clair, Counterpunch, June 1999) as the example article.

Here again is the analytical summary of that article presented in “Writing a Summary Paragraph.” In this example the main ideas are in green, the transitional phrases in yellow, and the role of each point in the larger argument is highlighted in blue. Notice that the phrases in blue all include content-independent analytical terms—terms whose job is to describe the structure of the argument, not just the topic. Those content-independent terms have been underlined.

Cockburn and St. Clair argue that the drug war is designed to impose social control in a racially discriminatory manner. They begin with an ad against the drug war, signed by many prominent people, which reminds us that the drug war is not working—the first step in showing that it has a different purpose from what most people believe. However, they point out that many of these same people once supported the policies the ad condemns, which leads to the observation that the drug war is deeply hypocritical, introducing the idea of a hidden agenda. Not only that, but past drug wars were really about social and racial control, which provides historical support for the argument. The authors then return to the present to argue that sentencing differences between crack and powdered cocaine show the racism of the drug war in practice. Finally, they make the more general point that the impact of the drug laws reveals the racial disparity. These two points show that the drug war’s impact matches the intentions that the earlier points revealed: racial and social control.

Using this summary, we can now proceed to analyze and evaluate the evidence given for each point.

**Analysis of the Evidence**

The goal of analysis is to identify the evidence (say what it is) and explain how it relates to the point it is supposed to support. (I say “supposed to” because it may not succeed. The purpose of a critique is to decide whether it succeeds or not, and in order to know that you must understand how it is intended to work.) Here is an example using one point from “Race and the Drug War.” In this example, analytical connectors are in blue, the main point is in green, and the examples are in orange.

To support the claim that the drug war is deeply hypocritical, Cockburn and St. Clair offer a few specific examples. They point out that the U.S. goes after Mexican banks involved in laundering drug money while ignoring American banks that do the same thing. They also remind us that some of the signatories of the anti-drug-war ad were themselves responsible for enforcing the drug war. They mention that George Schultz and Lloyd Cutler were both part of the government’s involvement with drug dealers while in office.

By using the analytical summary, with its clear statement of main points and their connection to the thesis, we are well prepared to discuss specific examples of the evidence thoroughly and
systematically. All we need to do is describe the evidence for that point, with a few examples. In this case, there are only a few pieces of evidence in the section, so we can actually present all of the evidence for that point.

**Evaluation of the Evidence**

Once we’ve described the evidence and its relation to the main point, we’re ready to evaluate. Remember that evaluation should focus on the three key concepts: sufficient, relevant, and representative. It is not necessary to cover all three of these ideas in every piece of evidence you discuss, but you should try to touch on all of them at some point in your paper. This example uses all three to show that it is possible to do so succinctly. (In this example, the evaluation is negative, but that of course is up to you. It’s your job to decide, using your own ideas, whether the evidence is sufficient, relevant, and representative.) The evaluative terms are in **blue**, the specific pieces of evidence are in **orange**, and the main point is in **green**.

For this point, unfortunately, the evidence is *neither sufficient, relevant, nor especially representative*. The authors *cite a single example of supposed U.S. inconsistency, or hypocrisy, in the drug war*, but *provide no evidence that the U.S. banks really are engaged in comparable activities*. This is clearly *insufficient* to establish *the claim of hypocrisy*. As for Schultz and Cutler, the argument is that they *supported the drug war while in office*, but the evidence provided shows that, in fact, they *undermined* the drug war by secretly working with drug dealers. While this may *show hypocrisy*, it is *not relevant to the stated claim that officials “espoused ... exactly the policies they now denounce.”* Finally, Schultz and Cutler are *not representative of the ad’s signers*, most of whom were not involved in covert alliances with overseas drug lords. Thus, while one might agree that *the drug war is hypocritical*, the authors have *failed to demonstrate the point with adequate evidence*.

The key point here is that the evaluation discusses *specific examples* of the evidence, and it *relates* those examples to a specific point that the article makes in the process of proving the thesis. (In this case, the relationship was shown earlier, in the analysis part, but it is reinforced here with occasional references to the idea of hypocrisy.) Once again, the technique blends *content-independent terms* (the key terms *sufficient, relevant, and representative*) with information about the content to show how the argument works.

**Balancing Thoroughness with Concision**

The three paragraphs above together add up to 419 words (181 for the summary, 86 for the analysis paragraph, and 152 for the evaluation). Clearly, if you used as many words to evaluate each main point in each article, you would be way over the word limit and have no room for analyzing reasoning or for the counter-argument. How, then, do you manage to fit it all in?

The key here is, appropriately enough, the idea of *representative evidence*. Just as the articles we are evaluating use examples to represent a much larger group—for example, Cockburn and St. Clair use Schultz and Cutler to stand in for all the ad’s signers—so you must choose a few examples to stand for all the evidence in the article. You provide a detailed analysis of those few examples, and then give a general description of the rest of the evidence, tying it to the examples and stating that it, like those examples, is or is not sufficient, relevant and representative. It is also possible to throw in a few more examples that you do not develop in detail, to show there are more than just the few you focused on.

To continue with our example above, we might add the following about the article as a whole...
Throughout the article, the authors rely on evidence that is insufficient (they offer none that governments routinely seek to repress their citizens), occasionally irrelevant (Nancy Reagan's charge of “murder” against casual drug users is irrelevant to the drug war’s racist impact), or unrepresentative (the overt racism of Richard Nixon is not typical of today’s politicians).

This paragraph is 56 words, bringing the total for the summary, analysis, and evaluation of this article to 475 words. If we assume that the other article requires as many words, this portion of the essay would be approximately 950 words, leaving about 550 for the reasoning and counter-argument. Compare the sample paper, which uses 259 words to evaluate the assumptions, including the author’s own assumption (24 words), which is no longer required, 251 for the counter-argument and rebuttal, and 93 in the conclusion, which is optional: a total of 603 words (579 without the author’s own assumption), bringing the entire essay to just 53 words over the maximum: not a significant problem. Removing the conclusion brings it well under the limit. With a little work on concision—saying the same thing in fewer words—you could cut enough additional words to make room for an introduction as well.

But there are other strategies for condensing further. First, notice that the example gives the analysis and evaluation in separate paragraphs. I did this to highlight how each part works, but you could combine them to be more concise:

To support the claim that the drug war is deeply hypocritical, Cockburn and St. Clair offer a few specific examples. They point out that the U.S. goes after Mexican banks involved in laundering drug money while ignoring American banks that do the same thing, but provide no evidence that the U.S. banks really are engaged in comparable activities. This is clearly insufficient to establish the claim of hypocrisy. They also remind us that some of the signatories of the anti-drug-war ad were themselves responsible for enforcing the drug war. They mention that George Schultz and Lloyd Cutler were both part of the government’s involvement with drug dealers while in office. But this shows that they undermined the drug war, not that they “espoused ... exactly the policies they now denounce.” Furthermore, Schultz and Cutler are not representative of the ad’s signers, most of whom were not involved in such shady dealings. Thus, while one might agree that the drug war is hypocritical, the authors have failed to demonstrate the point.

This paragraph is 171 words, as compared to the 238 when analysis and evaluation are separate.

Another strategy is to focus on the single key term where you feel that one article is clearly superior to the other. Often we find that two arguments are roughly equivalent on most points, but that one stands out on a single measure, whether it be sufficiency, relevance, or representativeness. In that case, it is possible to condense the evaluation to focus on that term, and just briefly sum up the other two points. I will not provide an example here because I think you can see how you could cut out part of the example I have given to focus on a single key concept.

Finally, we must consider the individual style. I wrote these examples, and my style tends to be long, so I end up near the high end of the word limit—more concise writers would be nearer the low end.

Once again, the key idea to take away here is that critical analysis must link specific examples of the evidence to the main point of the article that they support, and show why they are or are not sufficient, relevant, and representative.