

The Evidence Toolkit – Teachers' Guidance

Introduction

The Evidence Toolkit helps students to critically consider online articles, helping them to develop analytical skills that enable them to explore more deeply arguments within articles, test their reasoning and determine their own thinking on what they have read. It is aimed at more able students in the 16-18 age group.

Many of the ideas and themes that are introduced are illustrated by examples taken from the BBC Radio 4 programme The Moral Maze. Examples are indicated by this radio icon  (which is clickable in the PDF) and are described in the Appendix. Each icon represents a different clip.

In order to listen to examples from The Moral Maze, the student's computer must support the use of iPlayer which may require a flashplayer and a BBC login.

1 The Evidence Toolkit

1.1 Reason Checker. The Reason Checker helps students find the main claim  in an article and the reasons  to support it. It's not infallible, particularly on unseen articles. Students should feel confident to disagree with the Reason Checker when they can say why their opinion differs.

1.2 Reasoning Palette. Students categorise the reasoning, looking at what is portrayed as opinion (expert , popular , or personal ) and what portrayed as fact (statistical , example  or, for anything that doesn't fit the categories, other ).

1.3 Critique Templates. Each of the six types of reasoning has a critique template. This helps students to critique reasoning by asking the right questions.

- **Factual reasoning – Example.** This common way of persuading can also be a weak way. Examples are best if they are (i) typical rather than unusual , and (ii) sufficient by themselves to warrant the claim .
- **Factual reasoning – Statistics.** Statistical claims can be a very powerful way of making a point if the statistical sample is representative  AND large enough .
- **Factual reasoning – Other.** Students should think about both the reason itself  and how well the reason works to support the claim .
- **Opinion-based reasoning – Expert.** This is a common way to support a claim. If an expert agrees with a contentious issue, this can be very persuasive. But first check (i) that the expert has been quoted correctly, has not been misrepresented and has not had their evidence taken out of context ; (ii) that the source actually is an expert on the relevant subject ; (iii) that the expert is duly impartial and has nothing to gain from this opinion (financially or in other ways) ; and (iv) that other experts agree: if many of an expert's peers disagree with their statement, their credibility could be damaged. It is important to remember, however, that dissenting positions can be right (e.g. the majority used to believe the Earth to be flat) .
- **Opinion-based reasoning – Popular.** Sometimes popular opinion can be a valuable basis for reasoning – if we see people running out of a building we might follow them even if we haven't heard the fire alarm. But equally, just because of lot of people think something it doesn't make it true. Students should first check (i) that it is the opinion of the given population ; and (ii) that it is relevant for this conclusion . Students need also to be careful about the population in question – is this everyone in general, or everyone in some particular set?
- **Opinion-based reasoning – Personal.** Personal opinion is a common way of making a point but can be weak and difficult to spot. Students need to check the opinion is accurately reported  and then think about the person giving the opinion: are they credible , and are they in a position to know about the subject .

1.4 Objections Wizard. News that aims to give a balanced, impartial picture, will often consider an issue from multiple perspectives, sometimes stating objections, sometimes supporting them, sometimes providing counterarguments 🗨️.

1.5 Trust Toolbar. This contains a small number of materials from trustworthy sources to help students respond to the questions in the Critique Templates.

2 The News Articles

Diesel cars. This is a complex article from the BBC, with a lot of evidence of impartiality: weighing both sides of the issue. The overall conclusion is, unusually, rather hidden away. It's supported by several pieces of factual evidence, including some from an expert; but there are also a lot of counter positions presented.

Fruit conspiracy. This article is from a satirical news site, The Daily Mash. It's self-evidently nonsense, but allows students to explore the ways in which the structure is defective. The conclusion in the first sentence is supported largely through testimony. In the first case there is an 'expert', but the first thing he does is to offer a popular opinion ("*Everyone knows...*") – so we could mark it as either type of reasoning in the palette and apply the appropriate critique. Maybe better to mark it as Popular Opinion, and let the critique of the expertise of 'Henry Brubaker' come in the next sentence. His testimony that 'Fruit companies pay scientists' is neither coming from a recognised expert, nor does it agree with other experts. The personal testimony from 'Emma Bradford' supports her claim with an Example ("*Yesterday...*"). One claim is supported by another to form a complex web of supporting arguments. Also, there is no impartiality in this article; no consideration of alternative points of view. That's another strong indicator that something is awry.

Homelessness. The conclusion of this article from the Guardian is that the government is looking after its own voters is fairly easy to find. The reasons are a bit more demanding: the factual £10bn, the expert opinion from Shelter and the example of housebuilders (students may find it particularly tricky to spot that this is an example). There is a single mention of an alternative point of view phrased as a concession (that the scheme was intended to kickstart housebuilding).

Sleeves. This is an unusually strongly personal piece from the BBC. The main claim is at the end of the selectable text and is supported by two personal opinions marked by "*I am not aware.*" The expression of the opposing point of view ("*Ms Campbell's point...*") is brief and then countered.

Fake beggars. This article from the Daily Mail has its conclusion in the third paragraph ("*But lately...*") supported by three reasons. First, the example of the tourist towns; next the 2 out of 17 reason – although 17 is a small number, it represents the entire population so if Torquay is representative and the data correct, this is a surprisingly strong line of reasoning. And finally the testimony of the expert, Angela Parmenter. Again the article has concession to the other side of the argument in "*I can at least understand it*" in the context of other countries.

Appendix – Illustrations from the Moral Maze

Illustrations of Claims, Reasons & Objections



Claim. In this excerpt, the witness marks her claim very clearly with, “I still have to conclude...”



Reason. In this clip, the chair of the discussion, Michael Buerk, lays out the issue and then, after 30 seconds, explicitly marks the most important reason.



Reason. In this example, a series of reasons are introduced, each marked with “because”.



Objection. In this example of balanced reasoning, Douglas Murray agrees with his opponent, Giles Fraser, and concedes that the Qu’ran has passages which are “highly inflammatory” whilst maintaining his point that that’s not a reason to ban the book (or any other).

Illustrations of Factual Reasoning



Example. Giving an example can make an abstract discussion more concrete, sometimes by creating a narrative or appealing to illustrative cases. In this excerpt, the example is marked explicitly by using the words “for instance”.



Statistics. When statistics are appealed to, the source of the statistics is often mentioned to increase the persuasiveness of the argument. In this example, Mark Bhagwandin responds by referring to statistical data published by a professor from the University of Oxford.



Other. One other type of factual reasoning is to use one case to shed a light on another – known as analogy. Here, surgical removal of the appendix is used as an analogy to abortion to claim that what medical procedures look like should have no impact on their moral status

Illustrations of Opinion-based Reasoning



Expert. In this episode of Moral Maze on the war in Syria, Medhi Hasan defends the standpoint that diplomacy is the best course of action by mentioning that various experts agree that it is.



Popular. While a point of view being held by a large group of people doesn’t necessarily make it true, it can be an indication. In this clip, the opinion of a historic group consisting of the British public, the media, and the government, is used to lend strength to the point made.



Personal. Panellist Giles Fraser talks about his own experience of being shot at in the Gaza Strip by Israeli troops, to support his viewpoint that Israel is often the aggressor in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Illustrations of Critiquing Factual Reasoning



Example Critiquing. Have examples been cherry-picked? In this excerpt, Anne McElvoy challenges Michael Morpurgo’s use of examples to support his claims, by describing them as “exceptions to the rule”. Morpurgo defends his examples by reference to the historical record.



Example Critiquing. Is the example enough? In this clip, panellist Matthew Taylor voices the criticism that a small number of examples does not provide sufficient reason to support the conclusion.

 **Statistics Critiquing.** The panellist critiques the use of statistics by questioning whether the numbers provided are actually representative of the issue at hand: suggesting that the percentages could be due to peoples choices rather than the result of a policy decision.

 **Statistics Critiquing.** Prof. Wendy Savage here challenges Moral Maze panellist Tim Stanley by emphasising that what's required is an unselective sample in which the whole population is included. (This clip also challenges the expertise of his source).

 **Other Factual Critiquing.** Is the factual starting point given actually true? In this clip, Tom Fiennes denies that the Green Belt policy is the reason for the problem with affordable housing in England.

 **Other Factual Critiquing.** Does the reasoning stand up? Here, the analogy between military intervention in Bosnia and in Syria is dismissed as a “false parallel”, by pointing out that the situation in Bosnia doesn't bear any relevance to the Syrian case.

Illustrations of Critiquing Opinion-based Reasoning

 **Critiquing Expert Opinion.** What exactly did the expert say – and mean? In this Moral Maze clip, the use of a specific term and the intended meaning of the term are discussed.

 **Critiquing Expert Opinion.** Here, Myriam Francois-Cerrah is introduced as an expert witness with explicit mention of the relevance of her being a Muslim convert, besides being a writer and broadcaster. In this way her expertise is immediately placed in the right field.

 **Critiquing Expert Opinion.** The objectivity of the expert opinion provided by Prof. Savage is questioned by alluding to her “activism” which might affect her perspective.

 **Critiquing Expert Opinion.** In his introduction to this programme, Buerk emphasises that Prof. Tallis' opinion is at odds with that of many of his colleagues in the medical profession.

 **Critiquing Popular Opinion.** Michael Portillo suggests that the portrayed opinions might not be held by all of those involved, but rather by only some of them; in other words, representing a minority view rather than one representative of the group.

 **Critiquing Popular Opinion.** How relevant is public opinion? Typically it is more relevant for questions of policy or value than for questions of fact. This Moral Maze discussion explores the role of public opinion in policy-making.

 **Critiquing Personal Opinion.** Here, there is a long argument based on a claim that the witness suggested moral equivalence between the morning after pill and the Las Vegas shooter: a claim that the witness explicitly then rejects (a minute later).

 **Critiquing Personal Opinion.** In this clip, panellist Claire Fox challenges Charlie Alcock's credibility by characterising her expressed opinions as “subjective nonsense.”

 **Critiquing Personal Opinion.** In this clip, the witness, Ben Griffin, is not an expert historian. Under cross-examination, Michael Portillo uses this explicitly to undermine his opinion by suggesting he is not in any position to comment.