



## COLLEGE OF IDAHO

# Writing to Evaluate

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### Writing to Evaluate

Evaluative arguments center on the question of quality. Is something good? Bad? Honest? Dishonest? Evaluative judgments are also about values—what the writer thinks is important. Sometimes the writer’s values are not the same as his/her readers’ values, so he/she has to bridge the gap by showing respect for the audience’s opinions and clarifying the points that they do and don’t agree upon.

An important first step in writing an evaluation is to consider the appropriate standards/criteria for evaluating the subject. If a writer is evaluating a car, for example, the writer might consider standard criteria like fuel economy, price, crash ratings. But the writer also might consider style, warranty, color, special options, like sound systems. Even though all people might not base their choice of a car on these secondary criteria, they are still considered acceptable or standard criteria.

To be taken seriously, a writer must have valid reasons for his evaluation. These reasons are based on criteria. Imagine choosing your attire for a job interview at a very prestigious law firm. You look at the jeans and t-shirts in your closet and immediately decide to go shopping. Why? Because the clothes in your closet don’t meet the criteria for the interview.

### *The Purpose of Evaluative Writing*

Writers evaluate arguments in order to present an informed and well-reasoned judgment about a subject. While the evaluation will be based on their opinion, it should not seem opinionated. Instead, it should aim to be reasonable and unbiased. This is achieved through developing a solid judgment, selecting appropriate criteria to evaluate the subject, and providing clear evidence to support the criteria. Evaluation is a type of writing that has many real-world applications. Anything can be evaluated. For example, evaluations of movies, restaurants, books, and technology ourselves are all real-world evaluations.

### Five Characteristic of an Evaluative Essay

#### 1. Presenting the subject.

Presenting the subject is an often misunderstood aspect of an evaluative essay. Either writers give too little information or too much. Presenting the subject occurs in two different places in the essay.

First, the writer should give a brief introduction of the subject in the introduction of the evaluation. This introduction occurs in the second part of the introduction—the intro to the topic. At this point, the writer should simply name the subject and give a very brief description. For example, a restaurant review should include at a minimum the name and location of the restaurant. An evaluation of a vehicle might include the make, model, and year of the vehicle and any important features.



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Second, the writer should give a more detailed description of the subject following the introduction in the background section of the paper. Here the writer could give a more detailed overview of the restaurant (the type of decor, type of food, owners, history), describe the vehicle in detail, etc. Striking a balance between giving the reader the necessary information to understand the evaluation and telling readers everything is important. The amount of detail necessary depends on the topic. If you are reviewing a brand new technology or a machine, specific to your line of work, for example, you will need to give readers more information than if you are simply reviewing a restaurant or a doctor's office.

The language used in your description can be evaluative. For example, a writer can use descriptive adjectives and adverbs to convey a certain impression of the subject, even before the claim is made.

### **2. Asserting an overall judgment.**

The main point/thesis should be located at the end of the paper's introduction. It should be definitive—certain, clear, and decisive. Asking a question does not pose a definitive claim. Giving several different perspectives also does not give a definitive claim. It is ok to balance your claim, though, acknowledging weaknesses (or strengths) even as you evaluate a subject positively: "While the Suburban is a gas guzzler, it is the perfect car for a large family...."

Providing a map of your reasons/criteria within the thesis is a great technique for creating organization and focus for your essay. For example, "While the Suburban is a gas guzzler, it is the perfect car for a large family because it can seat up to 9, it has a high safety rating, and it has the best in class towing capacity." Not only does this example give a clear, balanced claim, but it also lays out the writer's reasons upfront, creating a map in the reader's mind that will help him follow the reasoning in the essay.

### **3. Giving Reasons and Support**

After presenting the subject and providing readers with a clear claim, the writer must explain and justify his/her evaluation using reasons that are recognized by readers as appropriate. This occurs in the argument section of the paper and should be the most extensive part of the paper. Reasons should reflect values or standards typical for the subject. If a writer uses criteria that is not typical for the subject, he/she must be prepared to defend that decision in the essay. For example, "Buying local may not always be at the forefront of a buyer's mind when shopping for eggs, but..." Each reason should be clearly stated as a topic sentence that both states the reason and refers back to the main claim. Going back to the suburban example, a body paragraph/section might begin with the following topic sentence: "One of the obvious reasons a suburban is great for large families is its capacity for holding that large family and all of their necessary traveling items."



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Following the topic sentence, a writer must include relevant examples, quotes, facts, statistics, or personal anecdotes to support the reason. Depending on what the subject is, the support might be different. To support a claim about a book/film, for example, a writer might include a description of a pivotal scene or quotes from the book/film. In contrast, to support a claim about gas mileage, a writer would probably simply give the information from the vehicle specifications. Support can come from a writer's own knowledge and experience, or from published sources.

#### **4. Counterarguing:**

Counterarguing means responding to readers' objections and questions. In order to effectively counterargue, a writer must have a clear conception of his/her audience. What does the audience already know or believe about the subject? Effective counterarguing builds credibility in the eyes of the audience because it creates a sense that the writer is listening to the reader's questions and concerns.

Counterarguments can occur at the end of the essay, after the writer has made his/her point, or throughout the essay as the writer anticipates questions or objections. Writers can respond to readers' objections in two ways. First, a writer can acknowledge an objection and immediately provide a counter-argument, explaining why the objection is not valid. Second, a writer can concede the point, and allow that, the subject does have a flaw. In either case, it is important to be respectful of opposing positions, while still remaining firm to the original claim.

#### **5. Establishing credibility and authority:**

A writer's credibility and authority lead to readers' confidence in your judgment and their willingness to recognize and acknowledge that credibility and authority. An author can gain credibility by showing that he/she knows a lot about the subject. In addition, the writer shows that his/her judgment is based on valid values and standards.

The writer's authority is in large part based upon the background of the author—education, etc. Is the author qualified to make a judgment? For some subjects, like a film review, simply watching the film might be enough. In other instances, like evaluating the quality of newly constructed cabinets or the engine of a new car, more experience might be necessary.



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*The Structure of an Evaluation Essay*

Evaluation essays are structured as follows.

- **Subject.** First, the essay will present the **subject**. What is being evaluated? Why? The essay begins with the writer giving any details needed about the subject.
- **Judgement.** Next, the essay needs to provide a **judgment** about a subject. This is the thesis of the essay, and it states whether the subject is good or bad based on how it meets the stated criteria.
- **Criteria.** The body of the essay will contain the **criteria** used to evaluate the subject. In an evaluation essay, the criteria must be appropriate for evaluating the subject under consideration. Appropriate criteria will help to keep the essay from seeming biased or unreasonable. If authors evaluated the quality of a movie based on the snacks sold at the snack bar, that would make them seem unreasonable, and their evaluation may be disregarded because of it.
- **Evidence.** The **evidence** of an evaluation essay consists of the supporting details authors provide based on their judgment of the criteria.

For example, if the subject of an evaluation is a restaurant, a judgment could be “Kay’s Bistro provides an unrivaled experience in fine dining.” Some authors evaluate fine dining restaurants by identifying appropriate criteria in order to rate the establishment’s food quality, service, and atmosphere. The examples are evidence.

Another example of evaluation is literary analysis; judgments may be made about a character in the story based on the character’s actions, characteristics, and past history within the story. The scenes in the story are evidence for why readers have a certain opinion of the character.

Job applications and interviews are more examples of evaluations. Based on certain criteria, management and hiring committees determine which applicants will be considered for an interview and which applicant will be hired.