

How can you develop a strong evaluation of an author's argument?

To strengthen your skills at evaluating an author's argument, use three strategies. You will see them in action here one by one.

Strategy 1: Evaluate the author's premises by corroborating or challenging them with other information.

The premises are the starting points for an argument, such as

- definitions
- assumptions
- basic facts

Suppose an author argues that the wearing of a burqa, a robe that covers a woman's body from head to toe with just a slit for the eyes, could be a security threat and should be discouraged or even banned in public places. Such an argument might be based on these premises.

- Not all religious or cultural expressions should be encouraged.
- Public safety is more important than some religious expression.
- Religious freedom is guaranteed in the Bill of Rights.

Directions: Indicate whether the information following each premise corroborates it or challenges it.

Premise A: Not all religious or cultural expressions should be encouraged.

- The First Amendment says that Congress cannot prohibit the free exercise of religion.

Response: This challenges the premise somewhat, although there is a difference between allowing and encouraging.

Developing Skills for Evaluation

Cluster 1 page 15

Directions: Indicate whether the information following each premise corroborates it or challenges it.

Premise A: Not all religious or cultural expressions should be encouraged.

- Although encouraged in some religions, marriage to more than one person is illegal in the United States.

Response: This corroborates the premise, pointing out that when there is a conflict between religious practice and some fundamental laws, the laws take precedence.

Directions: Indicate whether the information following each premise corroborates it or challenges it.

Premise A: Not all religious or cultural expressions should be encouraged.

- A 2012 Supreme Court case ruled that religious institutions have a right to hire and fire teachers and ministers without government interference.

Response: This challenges the premise. In this case, the Court ruled that otherwise illegal practices were not the government's business in the setting of a religious institution.

Developing Skills for Evaluation

Cluster 1 page 15

Directions: Indicate whether the information following each premise corroborates it or challenges it.

Premise B: Public safety is more important than some religious expression.

- Benjamin Franklin said, “Those who would give up Essential Liberty, to purchase a little temporary Safety, deserve neither Liberty nor Safety.”

Response: This opinion from a well-respected founder challenges the premise.

Premise B: Public safety is more important than some religious expression.

- A Florida court ruled that a woman who refused to remove her veil for a driver's license photo could not get her license.

Response: This corroborates the premise.

Premise B: Public safety is more important than some religious expression.

- A Wisconsin couple was convicted of second-degree reckless homicide in the death of their diabetic daughter for praying for her instead of taking her to a doctor.

Response: This corroborates the premise.

Premise C: Religious freedom is guaranteed in the Bill of Rights.

- The First Amendment says that Congress cannot pass a law related to religion or prohibit anyone's free exercise of religion.

Response: This fact corroborates the premise.

Premise C: Religious freedom is guaranteed in the Bill of Rights.

- Thomas Jefferson famously said that there is a “wall of separation” between church and state.

Response: This both corroborates and challenges. It supports the idea that government cannot interfere with religion. However, it also suggests that religion cannot enter the public sphere to receive support from the government.

How can you develop a strong evaluation of an author's argument?

Strategy 2: Evaluate the author's claims to decide whether they follow logically from the premises.

Different premises will lead to different claims. Consider the position of Senator Joseph McCarthy in the 1950s. He thought communism was the most serious threat facing the United States. Which claim is more consistent with this premise?

- American communists should be rooted out and punished.
- American communists' free speech should be protected.

Since McCarthy believed communism was the greatest threat, the first statement is more consistent with McCarthy's premise.

Directions: For each of the following premises, which claim follows most logically?

Premise A: There should be few, if any, exceptions to the freedom of speech guaranteed in the Bill of Rights.

- Only speech that causes real harm or danger should be limited.
- Offensive hate speech should not be allowed.

Response: If there should be almost no exceptions to freedom of speech, only speech that causes real harm or danger should be limited, not merely offensive speech.

Premise B: Hate speech can lead to violence, as Hitler's Nazi Germany painfully showed.

- To be on the safe side, hate speech should be banned.
- The threat of violence must be very real, not just possible, before freedom of speech should be limited.

Response: The first claim follows most logically from the premise. Many European countries ban hate speech based on this reasoning.

How can you develop a strong evaluation of an author's argument?

Strategy 3: Evaluate the author's evidence by corroborating or challenging it with other information.

Evidence includes the facts and reliable opinions used to support a statement. For example, an author might cite the following quotation from the reference book *Encyclopedia of Islam* as evidence that wearing the burqa is not a requirement in Islamic law.

No explicit religious injunction for the burqa is found in the [Ko]ran [I]t is not required dress for women.

Developing Skills for Evaluation

Cluster 1 page 15

Directions: Decide whether the statement that follows the quotation corroborates or challenges it.

No explicit religious injunction for the burqa is found in the [Ko]ran [I]t is not required dress for women.

Statement A: The Koran requires women to dress modestly but does not specify the type of dress that satisfies that requirement.

Response: This information corroborates the quotation, providing clarity on what the Koran does require.

Developing Skills for Evaluation

Cluster 1 page 15

Directions: Decide whether the statement that follows the quotation corroborates or challenges it.

No explicit religious injunction for the burqa is found in the [Ko]ran [I]t is not required dress for women.

Statement B: Since there is no specific description of modest dress, some Muslims interpret the Koran to require the wearing of a burqa.

Response: This statement somewhat challenges the quotation because it leaves room for some Muslims to conclude that the burqa is the only way to satisfy the requirement for modesty.

Developing Skills for Evaluation

Cluster 1 page 15

Directions: Decide whether the statement that follows the quotation corroborates or challenges it.

No explicit religious injunction for the burqa is found in the [Ko]ran [I]t is not required dress for women.

Statement C: The burqa is a mask, making identification or participation in economic and social life virtually impossible.

Response: This statement somewhat corroborates the quotation because it leaves room to conclude that since the burqa does not need to be worn for religious purposes, it must have other purposes.