Evidence: the Good, the Bad, and the Ugly

Perhaps you haven't noticed, but people are crazy. They'll say anything. Somewhere in the world there is someone who believes even the most ridiculous things you can think of. There is a group of people who think the world is flat. No, really. They have a website.

What does this have to do with debate? Debaters often rely on published evidence to "prove" their arguments. There have been crazy people forever, but now that we have the Internet and relatively cheap paper printing it is very easy for anyone to get published in an obscure magazine, an unmoderated website, or a blog. Debaters need to have the ability to determine the quality and believability of any given card, or they risk losing debates because they didn't realize the other team's evidence was bad.

When you look at any card, whether it is one you have, one you are thinking about cutting, or one an opponent has read in a debate round, you should think about the author's qualifications, the source of publication, the date of publication, and the content of the quote itself.

The Author: Who Is This Loser?

It's easy to be impressed by arguments that are made in writing. In fact, it is common for people to assume that if they see something in print it must have a solid basis in fact. The painful truth is that people often write about issues they know nothing about, and your opponents in a debate round are not about to tell you if their authors are unqualified. So, what can you do to distinguish between authors you should trust and those you shouldn't? Here are several questions you should ask if you want to undermine the other team's evidence:

Is the author a person or a publication?

Some newspapers or magazines don't list an individual author for their articles. If the card just lists the publication, you should ask your opponent to explain who wrote the article, how the publication arrived at its conclusions, and even who owns the publication. Most people never think about

this kind of thing, so they have a hard time explaining it. This is also a wake-up call to you to research this process for yourself.

### Does the card list the author's qualifications?

If the card doesn't explain why the author is qualified, you should ask your opponent who this person is. Sometimes this will result in them giving you a valid qualification. Most of the time, however, your opponent will have no idea how to answer your question. You can assert that the person might be unqualified — after all the percentage of qualified people in the world is significantly smaller than the percentage of unqualified people, so the chances are that any given author is unqualified. This is also a good reason for you to find qualified authors when you are doing research, and to list their qualifications in the cite of your cards.

Do the author's qualifications have anything to do with the claims of the evidence?

Just because someone is a professor of something or a member of some prestigious organization doesn't mean they know everything. A professor of physics, for example, doesn't necessarily know anything about politics. A member of the U.S. Senate doesn't necessarily know anything about atmospheric science. Pay careful attention to the exact nature of the author's qualifications, and ask yourself (and your opponent) what the author's expertise has to do with the claims in the evidence.

Does the author have a vested interest in saying what she said?

Even qualified people can be biased. Many people write about issues they have a personal interest in. Can you trust the President of the United States to be honest about whether one
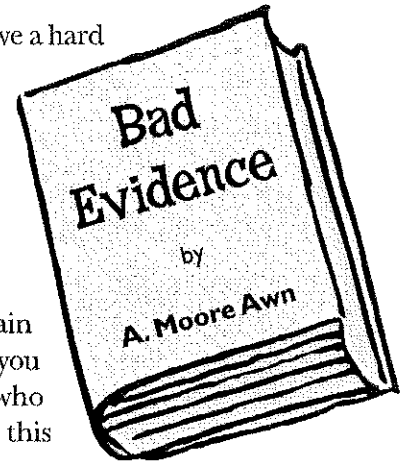
of his policies is working? Probably not. Can you trust a lawyer who is representing someone accused of murder to tell the truth about the person's guilt or innocence? Not really. If one of your opponent's authors seems to be biased about an issue, you should argue that the evidence cannot be trusted.

How do they know?

If all else fails, this question will often ride to your rescue. Sometimes, experts make arguments based on extensive research and careful consideration. Other times, they are just guessing. Especially if the other team's evidence does not do a good job of explaining its claims (see "Data, Warrants and Claims," below), ask your opponent how their author arrived at the conclusions of the evidence. Again, many debaters will be unable to explain this process, and the credibility of their evidence will be undermined.

The Source of Publication: Who Printed This Stuff?

Sometimes the most important piece of information in a cite is the name of the publication where the quote was originally found. This is especially true when it is difficult to tell if an author is qualified, or when no individual author is listed in the cite. Some publications are more credible than others. For example, major newspapers like the *New York Times* hire trained journalists and have a large editorial staff who check the quality of the writing and research in their articles. Here are some questions you should ask when you are trying to decide if a publication is credible:

What kind of publication is this?

Was the quote published in a newspaper, a magazine, a book, a web site, or something else? The answer will help determine what else you might ask about, and if your opponents don't know what kind of publication their own evidence comes from it makes them look less believable.

Is the publication peer reviewed (or edited)?

Some publications (like blogs) don't have any standards concerning what they print. For many web sites, all you have to do is write something and the site will automatically post it. You could be writing nonsense words or listing the names of all your pets, and your words would still get printed. Other publications have tough screening processes. Writers must submit their articles to an editorial board or a committee of scholars to determine if they will get published. Publications whose articles have gone through a process of expert screening are called "peer reviewed," and it is easy to see why these publications are considered more reliable than some random web site. If a piece of evidence comes from a non-peer-reviewed publication, you can argue that it should not be trusted as much as a piece of evidence you might have that has been peer reviewed.

Is the publication related to the topic?

Some publications seem naturally connected to certain topics. For example, I might not trust an article from www.garden.org to provide a solution to the conflict between Israel and the Arab world. On the other hand, www.garden.org would be a great source for articles about how to grow the best flowers. Similarly, publications that operate in other countries (like foreign newspapers) might be good sources for issues of foreign policy but might not be as reliable when discussing U.S. politics.

Does the publication have an obvious bias?

Some publishers have a particular political viewpoint that affects all the articles printed by their companies. *The Washington Times*, for example, is a famously conservative newspaper, while *The Nation* advertises itself as an explicitly liberal paper. Publications can also be biased in other ways. The web site for the National Cattleman's Beef Association (www.beef.org) is probably not a good place to look for unbiased information on the benefits of vegetarianism.

The Date of Publication: Yesterday or Back In the Day?

The date of a quote's publication can be very helpful in determining the quality of the evidence. If you are debating about a situation that

can change a lot in a short amount of time (like public opinion about politics or the health of the U.S. economy), it is crucial to have the most recent evidence possible. Debaters often argue that their cards should be preferred because they "post-date" their opponent's cards. This just means their cards are more recent. In some cases, however, having the most recent cards is irrelevant. Do the ends justify the means? The answer to philosophical or moral questions like this does not change over time.

You should pay close attention to dates when there are important historical events concerning the topic. If you are debating terrorism, for example, it is important to have evidence that was written after September 11, 2001. Dates can also be important with regard to specific authors. You would be surprised how many books are published by certain authors *after* the author is dead. Think about it: is a card from Aristotle in 2007 any better than a card from Aristotle in 1952? The guy is just as dead now as he was in 1952. The fact that a book or article is published after the author is dead doesn't mean the evidence is bad — it just means that the date of publication is not a reason to prefer one piece of evidence over another.

The Content of the Quote: Blah, Blah, Blah

You could have a quote from the most qualified author in history, printed yesterday in the most reputable publication in the world, and the evidence would still be bad if the quote itself was not good. Of course, determining the quality of a printed argument is a complicated thing. Without this skill, however, you will have trouble cutting your own cards as well as determining whether your opponents' cards are good. At the end of the day, nothing will help you develop this skill more than reading evidence yourself and getting experience cutting cards. Here are some specific questions that will help you along the way:

Does the quote say what the tag says?

Labels can be misleading. The fact that the tag on a card makes a claim doesn't necessarily mean that the quote itself makes the claim in the tag. In many cases, tags are a lot more definite and specific than the actual quote. For example, the quote may say that government spending "seems somehow related" to inflations, but the tag may say "spending causes inflation." You can point these inconsistencies out in cross-examination or in your speech.

Does the card answer itself?

Authors (especially experts) make complicated arguments that are full of words like "if," "maybe," and "however." Debaters like evidence that sounds conclusive. As a result, it is important for you to read the parts of your opponents' cards that are *not* underlined or highlighted. It is possible that the non-underlined parts of the card include arguments that go in the opposite direction from those in the tag. For example, the author of an article might say that gun control legislation is generally not effective. However, she might go on to say that one or two specific kinds of gun control would work if they were done correctly. If your opponents only read the first part of the author's argument, you might be able to use the part they did not read to answer their claim.

Be aware that some debaters (intentionally or unintentionally) highlight their evidence "out of context," which means that they use highlighting to make the quote say something contrary to what the author intended. Some debate tournaments have specific and harsh rules regarding what happens if a team reads a card out of context, so be very careful about using the word "context." In many cases, you can make the same point (without causing a ruckus) just by saying that the text of the card does not agree with the tag.

Is the author talking about the same thing the debate is about?

There is sometimes a mismatch between evidence and the debate round involving the specific claims and examples used by the author of the evidence. The author might be making a small claim about a specific situation, for example, and your opponent might be trying to use the evidence to make a larger, more general

argument. You can point out that the evidence is too specific to justify its tag.

Similarly, authors are often talking about a specific historical example when they make arguments. Just because a certain chain of events took place in the past does not mean it will take place again in the future under different circumstances, yet your opponent may be using evidence in a way that makes this exact kind of assumption. Differences in place can be just as important as difference in time. If an author is talking about a conflict in Europe, can we really assume that his claims can be applied to conflicts in Africa? If the assumptions of the evidence are different than the those of the debate round, you can point out the inconsistencies and argue that the evidence should be disregarded.

Has any part of the card been disproved?

Experts often try to predict the future, and when they do they tend to make more than one prediction. When your opponents read evidence predicting what will happen in the future, read it carefully to see if any of the author's other predictions have failed to come true. If the author has been wrong about one thing, we can assume it's a distinct possibility that the other predictions in the evidence are suspect.

Does the card contain a complete argument?

Experts who study arguments have developed different ways to evaluate whether a particular argument is complete (or solid). The next section describes one popular way to identify potential problems with debate arguments.

Data, Warrants, and Claims

There are probably hundreds of models of a good argument that have been developed over the years by different theorists. One of the most influential of these models — at least in the debate community — was originally published by Stephen Toulmin in his book *The Uses of Argument* (2003, Cambridge University Press). Although Toulmin's writings about argumentation are extensive and complicated, it is his terms for the three main parts of any argument that have been used most by debaters. Of course, most debaters use these words without knowing where they came from, so get ready to be one of the enlightened few. Oh yes, you are the coolest of the cool.

The most basic thing an argument needs is a **claim**. A claim is the point you are trying to make, or the thing you want to persuade the judge to believe. In the course of any debate, there will be many claims made by both sides. A claim could be anything — a prediction, a judgment, a statement of "fact," or a belief.

In order to convince the judge to believe your claim, your argument will also need to contain **data**. Data is information that your audience (the judge, or just people in general) already believes, or is willing to accept without a fight.

The crucial element of any argument in Toulmin's model is the **warrant**. A warrant explains how accepting the data in the argument should lead you to believe the claim. In other words, warrant explains all the assumptions that connect one idea to another.

What if your friend said: "Dude, your car looks like a piece of trash. It won't last you another year." This is an example of an argument that has a *claim* (your car will break down within a year) and *data* (your car looks awful), but no *warrant* (what does how your car looks have to do with whether it will keep running?). You might say to your friend: "Your argument has no warrant. My car has looked like crap for ten years, and I've never had a problem with it."

In the Toulmin model, things can change quickly. Once you convince someone to believe one of your claims, you can then use that claim as data to support a new and different claim. Likewise, if your audience doesn't believe a piece of data, then you have to treat the data like a claim and persuade them to believe it before you can use it as the basis for a new argument. If that's not complicated enough for you, go read the rest of Toulmin's book.