Claims and Evidence

Scholarly writing requires you to establish credibility with your readers. To establish that trust and to help readers see how you've come to your claims (ideas/assertions/arguments), readers need evidence (support, illustration, verification, detailed examples, etc.).

Building strong logic and reasoning in a essay (or any text) is really about the use of *claims, evidence*, and the *explanation connecting the two*. This work is what develops analysis, critical thinking, and valid argumentation in a text.

Think of claims and evidence like the scales of justice. Both are closely connected to each other and need to be in balance as you write. It's not fair to offer readers a bunch of evidence without claims to go with them. Likewise, you don't want to offer a ton of claims without evidence to that explores, develops, or supports those claims.

Claim: an assertion that you make about evidence

A *claim* is an idea, stated as something that the writer believes may be true. A *thesis* is simply a kind of claim - the main claim/argument you are pursuing as you write. Good claims explore ideas in a new and interesting ways.

You can come up with claims in two ways:

Deductively: Start with a claim that you want to prove and try to find evidence to support it or contradict it.

Inductively: Start with evidence and try to figure out what it means or indicates (come up with a claim about its meaning).

Is a claim just personal opinion?
Certainly a personal opinion can lead to a claim. But a successful claim can't just be based on the writer or speaker's opinion. A successful claim (one that others tend to take seriously) must be discovered or supported through evidence. The stronger the evidence, the more successful the claim.

Evidence: details, examples, illustration, or verification which supports (or leads you to) a claim

Evidence is usually verifiable/observable (readers could experience it, if they took the time), and it is best when it is specific.

Evidence in a scholarly essay is often found directly in the subject you are exploring (for example, the words in a poem, the graphics in an ad, lyrics in a song, etc.). Evidence can also come from sources, as they provide expertise or ideas/terms/data for readers to consider. Evidence confirms claims, but it also can challenge or complicate claims. When you use evidence in that way, it helps you reformulate your claim (or thesis) to make it stronger.

Linking claims and evidence with your reasoning:
When you write an essay, you show your thinking process - your way of interpreting the evidence that leads to your claims. Not everyone thinks like you do. You can't just make a claim and then give evidence without explaining to your readers how the two connect.

Evidence is what makes you think the way you do (the facts, the data, the personal experience, the work of others). When you tell the reader both your evidence and your reasoning (*why* the evidence makes you think the way you do), you give readers the chance to see why the things you are saying are credible and valid. These are moments that also allow you to evolve or "frame-up" your thesis. A good prompt for this move is answering "so what?."

Claim

Evidence

Explanation (an answer to "so what?")

So, what counts as evidence?
What counts as effective evidence depends on audience, purpose, discipline, and genre. Being able to read a *rhetorical situation* is an essential skill you can develop in college writing classes. As you know, contexts, assignments, and requirements/preferences are always shifting. Be sure to ask, or try to figure out, what counts as appropriate evidence.

In the humanities discipline, here are some things that typically count as evidence:

- **Close reading:** evidence that comes directly from the text
  (for example: looking closely at the possible meanings of specific imagery in an ad)

- **Sources/the authority of experts:** quotes, paraphrases, summaries, well-chosen and analyzed fully.

- **Examples from the broader culture:** current events, historic events, examples from popular culture, etc. Like personal experience (below), cultural observations can serve to help give examples of your point.

- **Statistics/data:** qualitative evidence - facts/stats that support or influence your topic

- **Personal experience:** As long as you don't imply that your own story represents everyone's story, your own experience can serve as an example in some (though not all) writing in the humanities. As with all evidence, you should tell your experience specifically. In an academic paper, personal experience can rarely "prove" a claim, but it can help to supply an illustrative example or show why you think the way you do.

- **Fieldwork:** your own original research, including things like interviews, surveys, on-the-ground observations