Often writers use personal experience to support an argument. However, when your personal experiences contradict those of your readers, your argument can fall flat on its face. For example, suppose you want to persuade your audience that the legal drinking age should be lowered from twenty-one to eighteen. You try to prove your point by writing that all your underage friends drink responsibly, never drive drunk, and use designated drivers. Unfortunately, this method of persuasion won’t convince readers who have witnessed their drunken friends’ foolish and irresponsible behavior, but only those who share your experiences.

That’s why writers who wish to persuade their audience usually need to use academic sources as evidence. Occasionally a professor may give you an assignment in which you give personal experience as proof. But more often, your personal experiences will merely be the “launching pad” that inspires academic research.

**Types of Evidence Found Through Research**

Academic research can help you find evidence that will help you develop and support your argument. It can also help you see the complexity of an issue and acquaint you with opposing views. In addition, because the academic research process is a discovery process, it can sometimes even persuade you to change your opinion. Throughout the research process, you will encounter different types of evidence that will enable you to build, and even rediscover, your argument. These are facts, statistical evidence, expert testimony, and examples.

- **Facts** are truths that are impossible to argue against. Factual information about a topic helps you educate yourself and your audience. For example, suppose you are doing research regarding whether or not the legal drinking age should change. You might discover that the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism provides scientific data about the effects of early alcohol use on a young person’s brain. On the other hand, some facts may not necessarily build your argument, but instead inspire you to do additional research. For instance, in 1984 the National Minimum Age Drinking Act, that set the legal drinking age to 21 across the country, was signed into law. Although this fact alone provides no evidence to support either side of an argument, it could easily inspire students to research whether there have been more or less drunk-driving deaths among 18 to 21-year-olds since this legislation was enacted.

- **Statistical Evidence** is numerical information that is typically interpreted in a certain way. For example, the National Safety Council can provide statistics on alcohol-related traffic fatalities. Because statistics can be misinterpreted, or skewed, to prove a point, it’s best to only use statistics from reliable sources, such as prestigious organizations and government organizations. The more unbiased a source, the better.

- **Expert Testimony** is one type of evidence that you can use in your research process. For example, in an argument about lowering the drinking age, your readers would be more likely to trust authorities on the topic, for example, representatives from the National Safety Council or the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism. Your expert testimony
also has to be current; so that your audience doesn’t think, “Well, that probably made sense 50 years ago, but not today!”

- **Examples** can be taken from personal experience. You can also create imaginary, or “hypothetical” examples to prove your point. In addition, your can do research to find examples. Suppose you discover that the legal drinking age in the country of Fredonia is 16, and they have the world’s lowest number of drunk-driving deaths? This example could provide you with evidence that a similar policy could work in the US. Beware, however, of using examples that are misleading. If only 1% of Fredonia’s population owns cars, then its low drunk-driving death rate has little to do with the legal drinking age.

A good/solid academic essay employs a combination of evidence and examples to support the argument. The evidence, examples, or support you use need to be relevant to your topic and should not be overwhelming. In other words, although research and use of academic sources are generally expected in academic writing, you should avoid over-quoting your sources, or use the academic sources to help you establish the argument without proper interpretations. An academic audience is more interested in your opinions and how you use sources to support your argument, and less in simply a summary or paraphrase of others’ works.