



# A practical guide to critical fundraising

## A toolkit for smarter decision-making v1.1

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## **Foreword**

Fundraising constantly faces challenges in fields such as best practice, ethics and regulation, where proposed solutions to these challenges often contain ideas that conflict with each other. For example, there are different paradigms proffered about the best way to build relationships with donors, and what 'doing the right thing' in fundraising entails.

How can fundraisers reliably assess the quality and strength of the arguments for and against these ideas, and discriminate between them?

This guide to critical thinking in fundraising – put together by International Advisory Panel members Cherian Koshy and Ashley Belanger – is intended to be used by anyone who wants to make sure they have the strongest, best supported arguments for their own ideas, and to assess whether others have the strongest, best supported arguments for theirs.

We hope this will become a resource that any fundraiser will use to help them crucially assess the arguments, evidence and theory that they encounter in their roles.

It will also be the standard tool upon which the various project groups of Rogare's International Advisory Panel base their deliberations and recommendations.

This is the first edition of this guide and we will be updating this with further exercises and examples in the near future.

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Director  
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# Introduction

Fundraisers need to make decisions. Lots of them. But how do we choose between multiple courses of action? How do we know which path to choose...and which to avoid? What evidence do we use to inform our actions? And how do we weigh our options?

If we had better guidelines for this process, we could make better decisions. And if we made better decisions, we could do better work and raise more money.

As fundraisers, we are inundated with information. There's academic research, so called 'best practice', case studies, articles, blog posts, infographics, etc. So how do we sift through contradictory claims and make sense of it all? After all, the clock's ticking. And our worthy cause is depending on us.

We're going to show you a process that debaters have been using for ages.

This process, developed by the Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA), has helped us identify some specific goals (Appendix A) for improving our critical thinking and reading skills. We highly recommend additional reading and training to help hone your own practice. You'll be able to check out Appendix D for further reading recommendations in later editions of this guide.

In the meanwhile, you can get started with this ready reference toolkit. This guide is intended to:

1. Support frontline fundraisers in thinking more critically about what they're reading and doing
2. Provide a decision-making framework to help fundraisers and fundraising teams make better strategic decisions
3. Help critical fundraisers craft winning arguments to convince their bosses to support the smart decisions they've made
4. Help fundraisers to better frame and advance the debates that affect their profession.

To that end, let's get to it.

## Step 1: Understanding evidence

We've entered an era where data-driven decision-making rules the roost. We fundraisers face ever-mounting pressure to use evidence to inform our choices. So what is evidence?

Evidence is any type of proof. It is the connective tissue between a claim about the world and the results we see or expect to see in the world. It can include philosophical, empirical, analogical, or statistical proof.

- Philosophical/logical proof: a series of axioms that are basic assumptions are constructed to create a conclusion that are inevitable from the premises. Often, logical proofs are tautologies.
- Empirical proof: describes something that can be perceived by the senses that can be independently validated by observation and experience.
- Analogical proof: is the most common type of evidence as it groups like things together. A similarity in one group is used to infer another type of similarity.
- Statistical proof: demonstrates a degree of certainty about a proposition. It requires a statistical method and is often used to falsify claims rather than support them.

### **Exercise #1: Self Check-in**

You've come to a fork in the road. So you need to make a decision. Let's consider the following questions:

#### **Question 1: Do I need evidence to make that decision? (Hint: Probably.)**

Theoretically, you should use evidence every time you make a decision. Realistically, we can't.

So here's a little rule of thumb: Use evidence every time a decision has real, tangible implications for our work as fundraisers. Decisions about priority or strategic direction should **always** be supported by evidence.

IMPORTANT: It is especially crucial to use evidence to evaluate controversial claims—e.g., “We should stop all direct mail programs and go strictly digital.”

And when in doubt, hunt it out. (Evidence, that is).

## Question 2: What type(s) of evidence do I need?

The type of evidence you use should fit the type of claim or decision you're making. So if your claim is empirical, your evidence is empirical.

**EXAMPLE:** You argue for an increase in the direct mail budget because most donors respond to direct mail. If you claim that most donors respond to direct mail, then your evidence should be statistical data, e.g. 65% of donors respond to direct mail over other forms of solicitation. A statement made by someone at a conference or in a blog post that *most people* are now online so they don't respond to direct mail is not an example of the evidence fitting the claim.

But sometimes there are no apples to your apples.

If you can't find evidence from the field of fundraising, consider analogous disciplines. Think marketing. Think social psychology. Think neuroscience.

For example, if I'm trying to determine the best conditions for an intimate solicitation event, I might find evidence from the field of neuroscience marketing research.

Sometimes, this will require that the fundraiser think about the issue from a different perspective. The evidence you're seeking might not only exist in the discipline of neuroscience or social psychology but also in the theory behind those studies. Rogare's review of Relationship Fundraising is aimed at doing just this by providing practical context to understanding how these fields play into fundraising theory and practice.

## Question 3: How do I know if my evidence is good evidence?

Hypothetically speaking, evidence like "65% of donors respond to direct mail" may seem like a great reason to go heavy on the postal. But we need to dig deeper to see if the evidence actually justifies a change of course.

We must test evidence to ensure that we're using *good* evidence—not just any evidence—to support our reasoning.

## Step 2: Testing evidence

The immediate inclination of any decision-maker should be to evaluate argument and evidence sceptically. This is not to suggest that we're seeking reasons to reject them regardless of what we discover. Rather, we are actively testing assumptions and conclusions instead of passively accepting them at face value.

So how do we do this?

We start by asking ourselves a series of questions. It's probably unlikely that we'll be able to ask (or answer) all these questions of every single article we read. But, we suggest keeping this guide handy as a ready-reference. If the decision is complex, or its consequences significant, dig deeper into each question.

### ***Exercise #2: Evidence investigation***

You've read something that challenges your assumptions. You're wondering about practical implications for your work. Do you change lanes...or that PowerPoint slide you've been using?

Before doing anything, we suggest you consider the following questions:

#### Question 1: How recently was this study published or conducted?

In some cases, we can determine how useful the evidence is by how close it is to us in time. Recency matters.

In our above hypothetical example, "65% of donors respond to direct mail," the data is from the late 1990s. Therefore it would not account for the rise of digital/social media.

That's not to say you should discount the evidence or the article citing the evidence. Not at all. But it does mean you should probably check for more recent research to see if anything's changed. Has digital fundraising impacted direct mail response rates?

#### Question 2: Does the evidence contradict itself, similar external data, or human experience?

Internal consistency is a must. If the late '90s research defined *donors* and/or *direct mail* differently throughout the study, the evidence fails the test. For example, does the term donor mean a person, a corporation, or a foundation? Does it mean a monetary gift or an in-kind gift? This type of inconsistency is

bad.

SIDE NOTE: Logical tests are one way to check for internal consistency. (See Appendix B).

It's a bit harder to check external consistency. There simply aren't that many precise apples to apples comparisons out there. This makes it especially tricky to try and prove that a commonly held belief is untrue.

So how do we test external consistency? Realistically.

It's bad when evidence fails to address readily available counter-examples. Examples could come from similar studies, other fields, or from human experience.

If, for example, a study concludes that fundraisers should halt direct mail efforts immediately, that would not comport with other data and evidence we have.

### Question 3: What is the source of this evidence?

Willingness to accept hearsay or rumour as gospel truth represents a very real danger to the fundraising profession. It's important to know where your evidence comes from and who wrote it.

In a worst case scenario, authors may have intentions that lead them to argue from a place of specific interest. (Read: sketchy ulterior motives).

Or, in a more benign case, they may lack the expertise, experience, or information to make a valid claim.

This is not to suggest that you need academic credentials to make an argument. Not at all. But if someone unrelated to the profession writes a paper saying direct mail is dead, you should probably think twice.

A lawyer providing medical advice may be right. But we should probably authenticate their sources and methods before accepting their claim. What is the original source of the evidence? And how did they arrive at their conclusion?

We also shouldn't accept evidence simply because it comes from someone who *does* work in the field. Even some of the most prominent figures in fundraising deserve critical examination. Do the work to verify. In the end, you won't regret it.

#### Question 4: How was this study conducted or how were the results obtained?

Academics use a bunch of tools to determine whether studies meet strict standards. And then their peers hold them accountable for meeting them.

So for our purposes, we need to find out whether a study is published and whether it has been peer-reviewed. Sally doing an informal poll of her own donors is not an academic study. Dr. Adrian Sergeant's research on donor loyalty should probably hold more weight in your decision-making process. Practitioner and/or market research comes somewhere in between. While practitioner research can add great value to the sector's knowledge base, it is always important not to accept it at face value and satisfy yourself of its validity by going through the process we're describing here.

There are certainly many more questions we could ask. But these present a great first step in assessing the evidence you're using.

Now that you have a sound basis for decision-making, it's time to craft your own argument.

## Step 3: Crafting and critiquing arguments

*[Later editions of this guide will include fundraising-specific examples in this section.]*

There is lots of literature out there defining the standards of argumentation and logic. Serious practitioners – of anything, really – should understand how it works.

Instead of a deep dive into the academic tradition, we're going to start you off with some basics. Once you get the key criteria for crafting an argument, you'll also get how to critique one.

### a) All arguments begin with assumptions

There is no view from nowhere. Everyone, everywhere is shaped by their worldview. This includes fundraisers.

Our worldview is shaped by our culture, our academic and personal experiences, and our research, among other influences.

The confluence of all our assumptions constructs a vantage point from which we make an argument. Each of those assumptions is potentially questionable.

In academic debate, we ask students to attempt to validate every assumption. At some point, this becomes a perilous exercise because there are far too many assumptions. We tend to agree to a certain set of assumptions to shortcut the conversation. Nonetheless, any assumption can be questioned. And most importantly, **we must question our own assumptions!**

Why do you think or believe what you do? Does that thinking or belief constrain your views on certain issues? Here are some common assumptions in fundraising literature:

- We are operating within the context of a Western, individualistic society
- Human nature is selfish/altruistic
- Philanthropy tends to reinforce the status quo positions of power and privilege

### b. All arguments have an objective

Any argument is trying to convince you that something is true/false, good/bad, worthwhile/worthless. In that attempt, it is important that the objective is clear

and forthright. This goes for our own arguments, too.

Is the source biased or does he or she have an underlying interest that alters their objective? Is their objective consistent with your objectives and with ethical frameworks?

c. All arguments require relevant proof

As discussed in *Step 1: Understanding Evidence*, you need proof to establish the validity of a claim. This goes for the main claim of an argument and also for all supporting claims.

Most often in fundraising, our proof will be empirical or statistical. But it need not be when the argument is philosophical. (Think ethics.)

No matter the type of argument, it is important to determine

- 1) Whether the proof offered is relevant; and
- 2) Whether the proof itself is valid.

Proof (evidence) may fall prey to any number of logical fallacies or statistical anomalies that should be questioned. (See “Step 2: Testing Evidence”.)

d. All arguments require reasoning to connect the premise to the proof to the conclusion

The end of any argument can be summarized as “therefore X” or “because of this, X” meaning that there is a conclusion.

Ideally, the conclusion follows naturally from the premises (assumptions) through the proof. Each claim is like a link in a chain, and each link is connected to the one before it. So when you get to the end of an argument, the conclusion is not a surprise.

The question we need to address is whether the connection between each of those three elements is valid. Do the premises connect to the proof and does the proof connect to the conclusion? In testing the latter linkage, we might ask questions such as:

- Are there other conclusions that we might draw from the proof supplied?
- Does the proof fully or only partially lend itself to the specific conclusion?

- Are there other explanations or external proofs that would lead to the same conclusion?

e. All arguments have conclusions that have implications or consequences

As an academic exercise, arguments don't *do* anything. Nothing happens if we're strictly putting pen to paper. It's the action we take as a result of good argument that matters.

In real life, our decisions have implications for our donors, our beneficiaries, and our organizations. We owe it to them all to conduct a rigorous risk analysis before embarking on a course of action.

There are three risk scenarios to consider: the risk of doing nothing, the risk of undertaking action (a) over (b), and the risk of undertaking action (b) over (a). The more potential courses of action, the more complicated the risk analysis.

Far too often, decision-makers falsely assume that there is zero risk to inaction. If we keep doing what we're doing, at least nothing gets worse, right?

Doing nothing does have at least some cost. It could be the opportunity cost of what else we *could* be doing that would be more beneficial. Or it could be that external circumstances (the economy, technology, people) shift even while we stand still.

When conducting a risk assessment, we might ask questions such as:

- What is the magnitude of the consequence? How many will be impacted and how deeply will they be impacted? A large scope but low severity may be preferable to a small scope and high severity. Or vice versa.
- What is the reversibility of the consequence? Is the impact temporary or permanent? If the benefit or harm can be retracted, that may factor into your calculations. Similarly, if the consequence has a long or short duration, that may play a role.
- What is the probability of the consequence? How likely is it to actually happen? Rarely does the proof establish 100% certainty. Instead it might suggest a greater or lesser likelihood. People often forget to

consider this risk factor. But if you have proof that a consequence is highly likely/unlikely to happen, that should inform whether the decision is even up for consideration.

### ***Exercise #3 Weighing our options***

This will be added to a later edition of this paper.

### ***Exercise #4 Critically reviewing your (and others') arguments***

Having been through this process, you've come to a conclusion about a particular issue or challenge. It's probably contributed to your stock of opinions you hold about fundraising. And – because we're all influenced by existing assumptions, including our own (there's no 'view from nowhere') – there's a good chance it actually reinforces what you already believe.

So you need to double check that your views and opinions really are informed by the best theory and evidence and that you haven't simply selected those that confirm your pre-existing assumptions. No one can be totally objective, but you can take steps to be as objective as possible. How do you do this?

In his book *The Edge of Reason*, the British philosopher Julian Baggini has devised a five-character schema to assess whether your arguments are as objective and devoid of personal assumptions and biases as you can get them.

- 1) Comprehensible – you must be able to comprehend the argument, in other words, it is understandable and seems to make sense
- 2) Assessible – you have to be able to assess the argument in a relevant way, by using appropriate evidence and theory
- 3) Defeasible – the argument should be constructed in such a way that it is open to revision or rejection based on its comprehension and assessibility by others. Arguments that are not defeasible are closer to ideology.
- 4) Interest-neutral – the argument doesn't rest on the vested interest(s) of the party advancing it.
- 5) Compelling – if all the other four characteristics are satisfied, you should be compelled to accept the argument (even if you choose not to – perhaps because you are harbouring biased assumptions – you should still feel this compulsion).

If you reach stage 5 but don't feel that compulsion, then that's a red light that something is wrong with at least one of the other stages.

Alternatively, if you strongly subscribe to a set of ideas, but going through this process, you find that it fails one or more of the first four criteria, you perhaps need to rethink your reasons for holding these opinions: are you actually holding these views in the teeth of better arguments against them?

## **Appendix A: Goals for working smarter: the short and sweet of It**

### Scientific and Quantitative Reasoning Goals

1. Make inferences and hypotheses based on given results
2. Support or refute a position
3. Identify connected and conflicting information
4. Detect questionable assumptions
5. Evaluate the reliability of the information provided
6. Draw a conclusion or decide on a course of action to solve a problem
7. Evaluate alternative conclusions

### Critical Reading and Evaluation Goals

1. Support or refute a position
2. Identify connected and conflicting information
3. Analyze logic
4. Identify assumptions in arguments
5. Make justifiable inferences
6. Evaluate the reliability of the information provided

### Critique an Argument Goals

1. Evaluate alternative conclusions
2. Address additional information that could strengthen or weaken the argument
3. Detect logical flaws and questionable assumptions
4. Evaluate the reliability of the information (including recognizing potential bias)

## **Appendix B: Common logical fallacies**

[Future editions of this guide will flesh these out.]

- a. Begging the Question
  - i. Simple iteration
  - ii. Iteration by generalization
  - iii. Argument in a circle

- b. Non-sequitur
  - i. Post hoc
  - ii. Composition or Division
  - iii. Accident
  - iv. Equivocation
  - v. Argument beside the point
- c. Hominem
  - i. Populum
  - ii. Ignorantiam
  - iii. Verecundiam

### **Appendix C: Companion Activities/Exercises**

This will be added to a later edition of this paper.

### **Appendix D: Geeking Out (more reading and training)**

This will be added to a later edition of this paper.

## Rogare Associate Members

Rogare is supported in its work by a number of Associate Members – partners to the fundraising sector that share our critical fundraising ethos. Our Associate Members are:

[Ask Direct](#) – Irish creative agency (Global group)

[Bluefrog](#) – creative agency (UK group)

[DTV Group](#) – Direct response agency (Global group)

[Ethical!](#) – telephone fundraising agency (UK group)

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[Rapidata](#) – regular giving specialist (UK group)



Associate Members – helping Rogare to change the way we think about fundraising

We also have a research association with the [Resource Alliance](#).



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