

SAMPLE CRITIQUE OF “ANIMAL RESEARCH SAVES HUMAN LIVES”

In her article “Animal Research Saves Human Lives,” published in the Wall Street Journal, Heloisa Sabin fails to effectively argue her claim that animal research is still necessary for medical advancement.

Sabin primarily attempts to use the polio epidemic that took place in this country during the 1950s to support her thesis. Sabin quotes her late husband, a researcher who oversaw the development of the oral polio vaccine, “There could have been no oral polio vaccine without the use of innumerable animals.” Because Dr. Sabin was the primary researcher in the development of this vaccine, he has ample authority in this area, and so his professional opinion, stated to a reporter and confirmed by his wife, counts as strong (though by no means definitive) evidence in support of the conclusion that animal research was specifically necessary to develop a vaccine for polio in the ’40s and ’50s.

But proving that animals were necessary to develop a vaccine is not the same thing as proving that the vaccine itself was necessary to cure polio. To link the polio vaccine with progress in healthcare, Sabin cites a report put out by the World Health Organization: “In 1961...oral vaccine was introduced in the United States and distributed widely. In the nearly forty years since, polio has been eradicated in the Western Hemisphere...” The correlative evidence supports the claim that the distribution of the polio vaccine led to the decrease in the disease’s prevalence in the parts of the world where it was administered.

Sabin's attempts to rebut the claim that the vaccine was unnecessary, alleging that assertions that polio was already dying out due to increased sanitation practices are "not true." In support of her counterargument, Sabin states that paralytic polio cases were actually *increasing* due to the increase in the average age of those infected, which was, in turn, due to a decreasing infection rate. But since her citation of a decreasing infection rate would support—rather than refute—the assertion (though by no means prove) that polio was dying out, her argument here is flawed. The increasing *severity* of polio cases could be used as evidence to support that claim that the vaccine was still necessary, but she does not claim this. Her evidence, thus, in no way disproves—and, indeed, rather supports—the claim that the disease may have been dying out.

Primarily, however, Sabin merely dismisses the arguments of anyone who reaches a different conclusion than her own, implying that the debate is between "scientists" and "animal rights activists" and implies that there is no other plausible objections or alternatives to animal research. This lack of self-skepticism or engagement with contrary opinions leaves her argument vulnerable to opposing claims, weak or strong.

To prove her central claim, Sabin needs to offer evidence that animal research is still necessary today, not merely that it was necessary sixty years ago. Instead, she only restates, with increasing levels of specificity, her central claim that animals are, in fact, necessary for research. Her evidence thus "begs the question" of the very thing she is trying to prove without offering any reasons to believe her claim true. Because her own authority is weak (she does not claim to be any kind of scientist at all) and she cannot use her husband's authority to make assertions about the *current* state of scientific research, simply stating that animal research is necessary to test vaccines, without any kind of corroborating evidence, cannot logically be considered support for her claims.

Sabin devotes a significant portion of her argument (nearly half) toward establishing that the disease of polio was a serious problem prior to its near eradication. She presents evidence that the polio vaccine was both effective and necessary, as well the expert opinion of the lead scientist that it wouldn't have been possible to achieve at the time without animal testing. She also asserts on several occasions that the vaccine is still necessary. Oddly, it is this last point that is the most critical to proving her thesis, yet it is the one part of her argument where she utilizes no external authorities, sources, statistics, or even anecdotal evidence to support this critical claim. Coupled with her failure to present or successfully rebut any possible points against her thesis, Sabin's essay fails to make an effective argument that "Animal Research Saves Human Lives."