

Claims, Claims, Claims

engl 131 / composition / university of washington / chang

We will spend a great deal of time and attention and effort in identifying, developing, clarifying, and strengthening argumentative claims. A claim persuades, argues, convinces, proves, or provocatively suggests something to a reader who may or may not initially agree with you.

What most non-academics mean by argument is usually a polar opposition or heated debate: I win/you lose; you're a Democrat/I'm a Republican; I'm for the death penalty/you're a bleeding-heart liberal against the death penalty; I'm pro-choice/you're against choice. Though academic arguments can be just as heated and draw on political, social, cultural, or personal positions and experiences, academic claims are different – often more complex, nuanced, specific, and detailed. Most academic argument is bounded by what is considered debatable or up for inquiry within a discipline, acknowledging that some questions are already settled (though that too may end up being debatable).

The 'rules' of academic argument exclude the following as support:

- Because it is my personal opinion
- Because my friends or relatives think so or most people think so
- Because it's always been, it's tradition
- Because it's obvious
- Because it's morally right

What a Claim Is

–A claim is the main argument of an essay. It is probably the single most important part of an academic paper. The complexity, effectiveness, and quality of the entire paper hinges on the claim. If your claim is boring or obvious, the rest of the paper probably will be too.

–A claim defines your paper's goals, direction, scope, and exigence and is supported by evidence, quotations, argumentation, expert opinion, statistics, and telling details.

–A claim must be argumentative. When you make a claim, you are arguing for a certain interpretation or understanding of your subject.

–A good claim is specific. It makes a focused argument (MTV's popularity is waning because it no longer plays music videos) rather than a general one (MTV sucks).

Why Descriptive Thesis Statements are NOT Arguable Claims

Following are examples of descriptive thesis statements students write in high school. Each is drawn from the top-scoring AP English Language and Composition papers posted on the College Board website:

“To be a writer, one must have an elite understanding of diction, syntax and tone. These literary devices are utilized by writers, including Eudora Welty, as a method for expressing the message that they wish to convey to readers.”

“In the excerpt from *One Writer's Beginnings*, Eudora Welty conveys a positive tone toward her childhood experience. She accomplishes this through the use of descriptive diction, impressionable images, and unusual syntax.”

“The two passages given describe the swamp in very different lights. Although they are in some ways familiar, the styles of the authors of these paragraphs are very different.”

These are NOT argumentative claims because the writers' strategy here is to create a thesis statement that is DESCRIPTIVE. The writer is describing some aspect of the main text, and that's all their doing. It's like saying, “Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* is a play about two star crossed lovers and two warring families.”

Descriptive theses do not investigate anything, critique anything, or analyze anything. Descriptive claims also do not invite support and argument from outside of the central text nor do descriptive papers apply what has been learned in the central text to other texts.

Opinion vs. Arguable claim

Opinion:

- Twinkies are delicious.
- I like dance music.
- I think Virginia Woolf is better than James Joyce.
- The governor is a bad man.

Argument/Arguable claim:

- Twinkies taste better than other snack cakes because of their texture, their creamy filling, and their golden appearance.
- Dance music has become popular for reasons that have nothing to do with the quality of the music; rather, the clear, fast beats respond to the need of people on amphetamines to move, and to move quickly.
- Virginia Woolf is a more effective writer than James Joyce because she does not rely on elaborate language devices that ultimately confuse and alienate the reader.
- The governor has continually done the community a disservice by mishandling money, focusing on frivolous causes, and failing to listen to his constituents.

What are the differences?

- An argument is supported by evidence, which can be debated/challenged. Opinion is supported by more opinion (and ultimately you end up with something along the lines of “Well, just because, okay?”).
- A claim can be substantiated with research, evidence, testimony, and academic reasoning.
- A claim is something more than statement and support: an arguable claim also goes on to address the “so what?” question, the implications and why we should care in the first place.
- Remember that not all claims are created equal, and though a claim may be arguable, the best claims are focused, specific, complex, and relevant.

Counterclaims

In arguing a claim, you should always consider potential counterclaims and counterarguments. For instance, in response to the above claim about the Seahawks, someone might say: “You’re wrong. The Hawks defensive problems last year were a result of poor coaching on the part of the defensive coordinator.” This counterclaim denies the validity of my claim. Usually, it’s important to address counterclaims in your writing.

Examples of Complex Claims

Following are examples of argumentative claims written by 100-level English students at UW. Each is drawn from the winning essays published by e.g., the UW’s journal of 100-level writing:

“Despite the mystery surrounding this famous speech, its contents can be understood in terms of what Mary Louis Pratt calls a ‘contact zone.’ In Pratt’s article *Arts of the Contact Zone*, she introduces this zone as the chaotic space in which cultures collide. Essential features of the contact zone include autoethnography, the representation of one’s own culture that responds to representations made by others, and transculturation, the selective absorption of the dominant culture by a marginal group. These features of autoethnography and transculturation emerge prominently in Chief Seattle’s speech, shedding more insight on the interactions between the Native Americans and the Euro-Americans; however, in the context of the unique circumstances surrounding the text, Seattle’s speech ultimately demonstrates the inherent dangers of representation and misrepresentation in the contact zone.”

“Rapid technological advancements and an influx of media in today’s society have connected us in more ways than ever thought possible. Television, movies, newspapers, magazines, the internet, and other forms of the media all contribute to the highly connected global society. This intricate network of communication has vastly expanded our sphere of knowledge and understanding in the cultural context. Through television and the internet, we can access news and events in other countries minutes after they happen. Through pictures and stories, we can learn about the various cultures and practices all the way across the world. However, with this expanded access also come certain limitations. Often overlooked is the fact that the information has been filtered through numerous entities, only allowing us to see through the eyes of the creator, greatly limiting our perceptions of the world. Sometimes subtle and unintentional, other times blatantly obvious and highly structured, the influences of the media present society with a constructed reality, as each article, be it a news story, photograph, or even voice, is strategically selected and presented to convey a certain message. This process becomes destructive when it begins to shape our opinions, perceptions, and ideologies, especially concerning other cultures.”

Myths About Claims

Myth #1: A claim should be general so that lots of evidence in the text will support its argument.

Usually, a really broad claim can only be supported by really broad evidence, which ends up describing rather than arguing. So be specific, be concrete, be focused. Think carefully about what you are trying to argue, what the stakes of your argument are, and use relevant quotes from your supporting material to help you generate a specific claim.

Myth #2: A claim shouldn't include everything the paper is going to say because then it "gives it all away" and eliminates the suspense.

An argument essay is not a mystery novel—you want to be clear about where you are going with your argument so the reader can follow and understand and believe you. This is not to say that you need to make your claim an obvious road map nor does it have to be paragraphs long. State what it is you are trying to do, what it is you are trying to argue, and how you plan to accomplish it. The rest of your paper can flesh out your main claim with subclaims, specific quotes, telling details, examples, and evidence.

Myth #3: A claim should present a theme and provide three examples of that theme.

While your claim will tell you where you need to go, don't feel trapped inside the five-paragraph essay. Do present the information in a reasonable manner and place emphasis appropriately so the reader knows what is important and what is not.

Myth #4: A claim should never be longer than a sentence.

Don't confuse a claim, an argument for a thesis statement or a topic sentence. Your claim may fit into one sentence or it may require more space to fully outline, develop, and express. Depending on the length of your essay and the complexity of your argument, your claim should fit the project at hand.

Myth #5: A claim can simply be about presenting the main idea of an essay and then presenting your ideas. The connection between them will be obvious.

Remember that the essays you read for your assignments are in support of your ideas, your argument. How can you apply relevant material and ideas and methods and critiques drawn from an essay to your own claim? Writing is all about making connections and making explicit the ways your ideas mix, mingle, and reciprocate other writers' ideas. Obviously, proper citation and attribution must be maintained.

Myth #6: A claim should be true or correct beyond a doubt so the reader "buys" the argument

Constructing an argument and substantiating a claim is rarely entirely black-or-white, on-or-off, all or nothing. Argumentative writing is about being able to articulate a position and argue it using academic evidence. In fact, in your research you may find yourself disagreeing with sources at one point and agreeing with them later in the same essay. Arguments are often a mixture of assertion, acknowledgement, confirmation, refutation, and concession. Complex claims rarely have a single right or wrong answer; rather they are provocations, analyses, explications, or applications of concepts, theories, and ideas.