

CLAIMS, CLAIMS, CLAIMS

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WEEK

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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 cannot (only) depend on 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 Is a Claim?

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

- 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).

What a Claim Is Not

- A claim is not a statement of opinion. *Fried Twinkies are delicious* is not a claim. There is no way to argue against it, because it is subjective.

- A good claim is not overly general. *The Seattle Seahawks had a bad defense last year* is not a very good claim. A better one would be: *Last season, the Seattle Seahawks' defensive problems resulted largely from the offense's short possession times.*

- A claim is not limited to one sentence. If you have a complicated claim, it may take several sentences or even a whole paragraph to articulate it.

- A claim is not obvious. Using scientific evidence, expert interviews, and close reading of meteorological texts, you could successfully argue that it rains a lot in Seattle. But this might not be the most interesting argument to make.

Why Descriptive Thesis Statements are NOT Arguable Claims

A thesis statement is the main idea of a paper, but it is predominantly descriptive. Similarly, a claim is also the main idea of a paper, but it is argumentative. Following are examples of descriptive thesis statements. 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.

Examples of Claims

Here are two complex claims:

“The media is an influential force in our society. It carries the power to shape our thoughts and close or accommodate our perception of a particular event. In many cases, the media will shape an event around norms in society focused on a particular group of people, many times masking real and complex social issues that truly gave rise to the incident. These ‘master narratives’ oversimplify events and fail to tell the whole story in order to provide predictability and comfort to society or a group of people. This was the case during the Los Angeles riot of 1992.”

“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.”

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.

An Exercise

In the following exercise, identify which are claims and which are theses. Once you have identified the descriptive thesis, try to revise them to make argumentative claims.

1. Frederick Douglass’s Narrative is a very important work because it outlines how one can overcome adversity and educate himself. Douglass offers numerous examples of surpassing the expectations for a person of color in his time period. For this reason, we should all read his Narrative.
2. Stephen King is an excellent writer of fiction and horror. Surprisingly, he is also an excellent teacher of the basic tools of composition. In his book, *On Writing*, King offers many different strategies for beginners to improve their writing skills. By offering different approaches to writing, King demonstrates that he understands that all authors approach writing a little differently.
3. In his book, *On Writing*, Stephen King breaks up his “toolbox” for writing into four basic levels. By dividing the tools for writing into these four different aspects, King helps readers to understand that writing is produced when many distinct skills are combined. This approach of dividing skills into parts is especially useful for teaching writing in a University setting because while many students have all the various skills needed to be excellent writers, they often have not put all these skills to work together until they reach a composition class. Because of his acute awareness of how synthetic sophisticated writing is, King’s book is an excellent choice for a reading in a composition class.