

Making a Claim

What is a claim?

- A claim is the main argument of an essay. It is the most important part of an academic paper.
- A claim defines the paper's goals, direction, and scope. It is supported by evidence.
- A claim must be argumentative.
- A good claim makes a focused argument (Because of the growing obesity epidemic, elementary schools should ban junk food from their cafeterias.) rather than a general one (Junk food is bad.).
- Academic claims are complex, nuanced, specific, and detailed.

Descriptive Statements vs. Arguable Claims

Descriptive Statements:

- do not investigate, critique, or analyze anything
- do not invite support and argument
- do not apply what has been learned in the central texts to other texts

Examples:

- The styles of Emily Dickinson and Walt Whitman are very different.
- During the Civil Rights Movement, people resisted racism in different ways.

Arguable Claims:

- can be debated/challenged
- need to be supported by evidence
- go beyond description, answer the "so what?" question

Revised Examples:

- The style differences of Emily Dickinson and Walt Whitman reflect their religious and gender differences.
- During the Civil Rights Movement, Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X resisted racism differently, yet both methods of resistance have shaped the American racial experience.

Opinion vs. Arguable Claims

Opinions:

- are not supported by evidence
- are supported by more opinion
- only state support, not necessarily the reason behind the support

Examples:

- Ice cream is delicious.
- Basketball is better than football.

Arguable Claims:

- are supported by evidence
- can be substantiated with research, evidence, testimony, and academic reasoning
- address the "so what?" question

Revised Examples:

- Ben and Jerry's ice cream is more delicious than other ice creams because it is creamy, flavored naturally, and made in small batches.
- Although basketball and football both encourage teamwork, basketball is a more social sport because it does not require its players to be physically aggressive toward their opponents.

Complicate your Claim. Good claims are always more complicated than “I’m right” statements. They also acknowledge their opposition’s point of view and give specific reasons for their own stance.

- Here are some claims that are arguable but not complex:
 - Fashion designers should design clothing for bodies of different shapes and sizes.
 - Space exploration is beneficial to humanity.

1. Always consider potential counterclaims and counterarguments. Considering and responding to other perspectives will strengthen your own argument.

- Some words that can be used to show counterclaims are:
but despite although conversely by contrast on the contrary
yet while regardless however nevertheless on the other hand
- The claims above have been complicated with counterclaims:
 - Although many fashion designers view the clothing they design as art rather than clothing for the masses, they should design clothing for bodies of different shapes and sizes.
 - Space exploration is expensive; however, the benefits to humanity far outweigh the expense.

2. Explain the claim. Say why it matters. Answer the “so what?” question. Add a “because” phrase.

- The claims above have been further complicated with explanation of the claim:
 - Although many fashion designers see the clothing they design as art rather than clothing for the masses, they should design clothing for bodies of different shapes and sizes, allowing a variety of people to be comfortable and fashionable without showing preference to one particular body type.
 - Space exploration is expensive; however, the expense is outweighed by the benefits: discovery of planets, stars, and other heavenly bodies, the unification of humans as they work together to reach the stars, and the increased motivation for new technologies.

Myths about Claims for Academic Arguments

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

Correction: Be specific, concrete, and focused. A general claim requires general evidence to support it.

Myth #2: A claim should not include everything the paper is going to say because then it “gives it all away” and eliminates the suspense.

Correction: An argument essay is not a mystery novel. Be clear about where you are going. State what you are trying to do, what you are arguing, and how you plan to accomplish it.

Myth #3: A claim should never be longer than a sentence.

Correction: Your claim should fit the project at hand. It may fit into one sentence, or it may require more space to outline, develop, and express your point.

Myth #4: The connection between your claim and your evidence is obvious.

Correction: Writing is about making connections and being explicit about the ways your ideas mix with other writers’ ideas.

Myth #5: A claim should present a theme and provide three examples of that theme.

Correction: Do not feel trapped inside the five-paragraph essay. Present the information in a reasonable manner, using the number of examples and evidence necessary to support your claim. Take into account the length requirements for your paper, the scope of your topic, and the evidence needed to prove your claim.

Myth #6: A claim should be true or correct beyond a doubt so the reader agrees with the argument.

Argumentative writing is not usually black or white. It is about articulating a position and supporting that position using academic evidence.