

8 Making Claims

In this chapter, we discuss how to recognize the kind of claim that answers your research question and how to tell if your claim is specific and significant enough to serve as the main point of your argument.

You need a tentative answer to your research question to focus your search for evidence that will test and support its answer. As you test it, you will likely revise it, but as you assemble your argument, you must understand the kind of claim you are making. You must also be sure that your claim is not just sound, but significant enough to need an argument in the first place. Ask yourself three questions:

1. What kind of claim should I make?
2. Is it specific enough?
3. Will my readers think it is significant enough to need an argument supporting it?

When you can answer those three questions, you're ready to assemble your argument.

8.1 DETERMINING THE KIND OF CLAIM YOU SHOULD MAKE

The kind of problem you pose determines the kind of claim you make and the kind of argument you need to support it. As we saw in chapter 4, academic researchers usually pose not *practical* problems but *conceptual* ones, the kind whose solution asks readers not to *act* but to *understand*:

The Great Recession of 2008–2011 was caused largely by negligent financial regulation that let banks take on too much risk.

8.1.1 Making Conceptual Claims

Beyond distinguishing between practical and conceptual claims, it is useful to recognize that claims address a range of questions: *Does a thing or a situation exist? If so, how should we characterize it? How did it get this way? Is it good or bad? What can or should be done about it?* Depending on the question or questions implicit in a claim, different kinds of evidence will be required to support it. The claims you make on a topic will fall into one (or more) of the following classes:

- Claims of fact or existence:
Average global temperatures have risen to unprecedented levels within the past decade.
- Claims of definition and classification:
Birds, not reptiles, are the direct descendants of dinosaurs.
- Claims of cause and consequence:
Exposure to asbestos is a leading contributor to lung cancer.
- Claims of evaluation or appraisal:
Shakespeare's greatest comedy is *As You Like It*.
- Claims of action or policy:
Pennsylvania should increase extraction fees on natural gas drilling to fund education.

The first four classes—fact, definition, cause, and value—concern conceptual claims. For claims of fact or existence, you must provide evidence that a situation is, in fact, as you characterize it. Claims of definition or classification depend on reasoning about similarities or differences that assigns an entity to some broader class or distinguishes it from other entities. Effective claims of evaluation or appraisal depend on criteria of judgment to justify why something is good or bad (or better or worse than something else). Finally, claims of cause or consequence connect sets of facts to show that some situation does (or doesn't) follow from or lead to another.

8.1.2 Making Practical Claims

A practical claim is one that argues for (or against) some action or policy. It is usually built from a chain of conceptual claims: one that demonstrates that a problem exists, another that shows what causes the problem, and still another that explains how doing what you propose will fix it. Readers may also expect you to explain the following:

- Why your solution is feasible; how it can be implemented with reasonable time and effort.
- Why it will cost less to implement than the cost of the problem.
- Why it will not create a bigger problem than the one it solves.
- Why it is cheaper or faster than alternative solutions—a claim often difficult to support.

If you advance a practical claim but don't make those four sub-arguments, your readers may reject your whole argument.

So as you assemble your argument, be clear about the kinds of claims you are making, whether conceptual or practical. Don't inflate the importance of a conceptual claim by tacking on a practical action, at least not early in your paper. If you want to suggest a practical application of your conceptual claim, do so in your conclusion. There, you can offer it as an action worth considering without having to develop a case for it (we return to this in chapter 16).

8.2 EVALUATING YOUR CLAIM

We can't tell you how to find a good claim, but we can show you how to evaluate the one you have from the point of view of your readers. Above all, they expect your claim to be both specific and significant.

8.2.1 Make Your Claim Specific

Vague claims lead to vague arguments. The more specific your claim, the more it helps you plan your argument and keep your readers on track as they read it. You make a claim more specific through precise language and explicit logic.

Precise Language. Compare these two claims:

TV inflates estimates of crime rates.

Graphic reports of violence on local TV news lead regular viewers to overestimate by as much as 150 percent both the rate of crime in their neighborhood and the personal danger to themselves and their families.

The first claim is so vague that we have little idea about what's to come. The second has more specific concepts that not only help readers understand the claim more clearly, but also give the writer a richer set of concepts to develop in what follows. Indeed, the precision of the claim signals how the argument is likely to proceed.

We do *not* recommend long, wordy claims for their own sake. But you benefit when you include in early versions of your claim more terms than you might ultimately use. That final claim should be only as specific as your readers need and should include only those concepts that you develop as themes in your argument.

Explicit Logic. You can also be explicit in the logic of your claim. Even with its relatively precise language, this claim offers only a single proposition:

Regular TV viewers overestimate both the rate of crime in their neighborhood and the personal danger to themselves and their families.

In the natural and social sciences, claims like that are common, even preferred. But in the humanities, such a claim might seem a bit thin. As you draft your working claim, try elaborating its logic in two ways:

- Introduce it with a qualifying clause beginning with *although* or *even though*.
- Conclude it with a reason-clause beginning with *because*.

For example:

Although violent crime is actually decreasing, regular TV viewers overestimate their neighborhood crime rate by 150 percent and therefore

misjudge personal danger to themselves and their families **because local TV evening news regularly opens with graphic reports of mayhem and murder in familiar locations, making many believe that crime happens nightly outside their front door.**

While that claim may seem overwritten, it foreshadows three of the five elements that you need for a full argument: (1) *Although I acknowledge X*, (2) *I claim Y* (3) *because of reason Z*.

You can use an introductory *although* clause to acknowledge three kinds of alternative views:

- Something that your readers believe but your claim challenges:

Although most people believe they are good judges of their security, regular TV viewers overestimate . . .
- A point of view that conflicts with yours:

Although many security professionals see fear as the best motivation for safety precautions, regular TV viewers overestimate . . .
- A condition that limits the scope or confidence of your claim:

Although it is difficult to gauge their real feelings about personal security, regular TV viewers overestimate . . .

If readers might think of those qualifications, acknowledge them first. You not only imply that you understand their views, but commit yourself to responding to them in the course of your argument.

When you add a final *because* clause, you forecast some of the reasons that support your claim:

Although many believe that school uniforms help lower the incidence of violence in public schools, *qualification* the evidence is at best weak *claim* **because researchers have not controlled for other measures that have been instituted at the same time as uniforms** *reason 1* **and because the data reported are statistically suspect.** *reason 2*

Again, we don't suggest that your final draft should offer a claim as bloated as these. But the richer your *working* claim, the more satisfying your argument is likely to be.

8.2.2 Make Your Claim Significant

After the specificity of a claim, readers look most closely at its *significance*, a quality they measure by how much it asks them to change what they think. While we can't quantify significance, we can roughly estimate it: *if readers accept a claim, how many other beliefs must they change?* The most significant claims ask a research community to change its deepest beliefs (and it will resist such claims accordingly).

Some research communities consider a claim significant enough if it asks them only to accept new evidence on a topic of common interest:

I describe here six thirteenth-century Latin grammars of the Welsh language. Found just recently, these grammars are the only examples of their kind. They help us better appreciate the range of grammars written in the medieval period.

(Recall those reels of newly discovered film in 2.3.3.)

Readers value research more highly when it not only offers new data but *uses* those data to settle what seems puzzling, inconsistent, or otherwise problematic:

There has been a long debate about how fluctuations in consumer confidence affect the stock market, but new statistical tools suggest little relationship between . . .

But readers value most highly when new facts or conjectures *upset* what seems long settled:

It has long been an article of faith in modern physics that the speed of light is constant everywhere at all times, under all conditions, but new data suggest it might not be.

A claim like that would be contested by legions of physicists because if true, it would mean that physicists would have to change their minds not just about the speed of light but about lots of other things as well.

Early in your career, you won't be expected to know what those in a field think should (or even could) be revised. But you can still

gauge the significance of your claim by asking how strongly readers might *contest* it. One way to do that is by considering *opposite* claims:

Hamlet is not a superficial character.

This report summarizes recent research on the disappearance of bees.

To assess how much either claim is worth contesting, change an affirmative claim into a negative one and vice versa:

Hamlet *is* a superficial character.

This report does *not* summarize recent research on the disappearance of bees.

If the reverse of a claim seems obviously false (like the first one) or trivial (like the second), then readers are likely to think the original claim is not worth an argument. (Of course, some great thinkers have successfully contradicted apparently self-evident claims, as Copernicus did when he asserted foolishly—or so it seemed at the time—that *the sun does not go around the earth*.)

If you are an advanced researcher, you measure the significance of your claim by how much it changes what your community thinks and how it does its research. Few discoveries have been as significant as Crick and Watson's structure of DNA. Not only did it make biologists think about genetics differently, but it opened up new lines of research.

But you don't have to make big claims to make a useful contribution: small findings can open up new lines of thinking. If, for example, you discovered that Abraham Lincoln read some obscure philosopher, historians would comb Lincoln's texts for traces of that influence.

If you are new to research, of course, your claim doesn't have to challenge the experts, just impress your teacher. If you can't predict whether it will, imagine your reader is someone like yourself. What did *you* think before you began your research? How much has your claim changed what *you* now think? What do *you* understand now that you didn't before? That's the best way to prepare for readers who

will someday ask you the most devastating question any researcher can face: not *Why should I believe this?* but *Why should I care?*

8.3 QUALIFYING CLAIMS TO ENHANCE YOUR CREDIBILITY

Some new researchers think their claims are most credible when they are stated most forcefully. But nothing damages your ethos more than arrogant certainty. As paradoxical as it seems, you make your argument stronger and more credible by modestly acknowledging its limits. You gain the trust of your readers when you acknowledge and respond to their views, showing that you have not only understood but considered their position (for more, see chapter 10). But you can lose that trust if you then make claims that overreach. Limit your claims to what your argument can actually support by qualifying their scope and certainty.

8.3.1 Acknowledge Limiting Conditions

Every claim has limiting conditions:

We conclude that the epicenter of the earthquake was fifty miles southwest of Tokyo, **assuming the instrumentation was accurately calibrated.**

We believe that aviation manufacturing will not match its late twentieth-century levels, **unless new global conflicts increase military spending.**

But every claim is subject to countless conditions, so mention only those that readers might plausibly think of. Scientists rarely acknowledge that their claims depend on the accuracy of their instruments, because everyone expects them to ensure that they are. But economists often acknowledge limits on their claims, both because their predictions are subject to changing conditions and because readers want to know which conditions to watch for.

Consider mentioning important limiting conditions even if you feel readers would not think of them. For example, in this next example, the writer not only shows that she was careful but gives a fuller and more accurate statement of the claim:

Today Franklin D. Roosevelt is revered as one of our most admired historical figures, but toward the end of his second term, he was

quite unpopular, **at least among certain segments of American society**.*claim* Newspapers, for example, attacked him for promoting socialism, a sign that a modern administration is in trouble. In 1938, 70 percent of Midwest newspapers accused him of wanting the government to manage the banking system. . . . Some have argued otherwise, including Nicholson (1983, 1992) and Wiggins (1973), both of whom offer anecdotal reports that Roosevelt was always in high regard,*acknowledgment* but these reports are supported only by the memories of those who had an interest in deifying FDR.*response* **Unless it can be shown that the newspapers critical of Roosevelt were controlled by special interests**,*limitation on claim* their attacks demonstrate significant popular dissatisfaction with Roosevelt's presidency.*restatement of claim*

8.3.2 Use Hedges to Limit Certainty

Only rarely can we state in good conscience that we are 100 percent certain that our claims are unqualifiedly true. Careful writers qualify their certainty with words and phrases called *hedges*. For example, if anyone was entitled to be assertive, it was Crick and Watson, the discoverers of the helical structure of DNA. But when they announced their discovery, they hedged the certainty of their claims (hedges are boldfaced; the introduction is condensed):

We **wish to suggest a** [note: not *state the*] structure for the salt of deoxyribose nucleic acid (D.N.A.). . . . A structure for nucleic acid has already been proposed by Pauling and Corey. . . . **In our opinion**, this structure is unsatisfactory for two reasons: (1) **We believe** that the material which gives the X-ray diagrams is the salt, not the free acid. . . . (2) **Some** of the van der Waals distances **appear** to be too small. (J. D. Watson and F. H. C. Crick, "Molecular Structure of Nucleic Acids")

Without the hedges, Crick and Watson would be more concise but more aggressive. Compare that cautious passage with this more forceful version (much of the aggressive tone comes from the *lack* of qualification):

We **announce** here **the** structure for the salt of deoxyribose nucleic acid (D.N.A.). . . . A structure for nucleic acid has already been proposed by

Pauling and Corey. . . . Their structure **is** unsatisfactory for two reasons: (1) The material which gives their X-ray diagrams is the salt, not the free acid. . . . (2) Their van der Waals distances **are** too small.

Of course, if you hedge too much, you will seem timid or uncertain. But in most fields, readers distrust flatfooted certainty expressed in words like *all*, *no one*, *every*, *always*, *never*, and so on. Some teachers say they object to all hedging, but what most of them really reject are hedges that qualify every trivial claim. And some fields do tend to use fewer hedges than others. It takes a deft touch. Hedge too much and you seem mealy-mouthed; hedge too little and you can seem overconfident. Unfortunately, the line between the two is thin. So watch how those in your field manage uncertainty and do likewise.