

## Title of Module: Claims

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### *Outline of Module:*

Video 1: What is a claim?

Video 2: Creating and Evaluating Claims

Video 3: The Structure of an Argument

### **Video 1: What is a claim?**

Review: [What is an argument?](#)

An argument is a form of persuasive writing.

- Many of you may think of the word “argument” as we use it in conversation. You may argue with a friend about where to eat dinner, or with your roommate about whose turn it is to clean the bathroom.
- But this is not what we mean when we use the term “argument” in academic writing. In academic writing, the purpose of an argument is to persuade the audience – that is, the person who reads your argument – of the validity of your point of view.
- The best result of your argument, of course, would be to convince your audience that you are right; that your point of view, or what is called a “claim,” is the best reasoned one, and you have convinced them to agree with you.
- Realistically, that’s not always possible. No matter how well you present your argument and how valid the evidence you use to support it, it’s not realistic to expect that you will always be able to convince your audience to adopt your point of view.
- Your goal, then, when writing an academic argument, is to convince your reader to **seriously consider** your claim and the evidence you give to support it.
- In the end, you want your audience to view your argument as well-reasoned and worth considering, even if they do not adopt your specific viewpoint.
- Shortly, we will discuss the elements, or structure, of an argument and the type of evidence you’ll use to support your argument. But before you write an argument, you have to figure out what you’re going to be arguing **about** – that is, you have to develop a point of view about your subject matter. That point of view, which in academic writing is called the **claim**, is what you will try to convince your audience of in your argument.

- First, let's focus on what a claim is.

### Claims: Definition and Examples

1. So, what IS a claim?
2. **A claim is the position you take or the point of view you express about a subject or issue.**
3. Your claim might be a political belief, or your point of view about a character's motivation in a novel you read, or your opinion about a scientific theory, for example.
4. There are a few specific requirements that a claim **must** satisfy.
  - First, a claim must express **a point of view with which a reasonable person can differ or disagree.**
  - Thus, **a claim cannot be a statement of a well-established fact.**
    - For example, a statement that the earth is round would not be a claim. Why not? Because no reasonable person would disagree with that. It's an established fact.
  - Finally, **a claim cannot be an expression of your personal taste.**
    - For example, you cannot make a claim that your favorite flavor of ice cream is chocolate. Why not? Because that's your personal preference. Now, if you claimed that chocolate is the **best** flavor of ice cream, someone **could** disagree with that. But they can't disagree that chocolate is **your** favorite flavor. Do you see the difference?
5. So, to be a claim, a statement must be one with which a reasonable person can disagree; and therefore 1) it cannot be a fact; and 2) it cannot be an expression of personal taste, because a reasonable person could not dispute a fact or a person's individual preference.
6. All right, then, let's look at some statements and see if they meet the requirements to be a claim. Pause the video, and think about which of the following examples, if any, is a claim. Take notes, and then start the video to hear the explanation of the answers:
  1. *Boston has many excellent universities.*
  2. *BU is the best university in the world to attend if you want to major in global studies.*
  3. *I'm very glad I'm a student at BU.*

7. All right. Let's evaluate these examples together. One of them IS a claim – a point of view with which a reasonable person can differ or disagree. The other two are not claims, because one is a well-established fact and the other is an expression of personal preference.
- No. 1 is not a claim, because it is a fact that Boston has many excellent universities.
  - No. 3 is not a claim, because being glad to be a student at BU is a statement of the writer's personal preference.
  - No. 2 IS a claim. Why? BU, without a doubt, has an outstanding school of global studies. But there are other universities with global studies schools, and a reasonable person could argue that another university's program is as good as, or better than, BU's. Thus, the statement that BU is the best university in the world in which to major in global studies 1) is a statement with which a reasonable person could disagree, 2) is not a fact, and 3) is not a statement of personal taste.
- Are you asking why No. 2 is a claim rather than a statement of personal preference? A small change will demonstrate the difference.
    - If No. 2 stated: *BU is the best university in the world **for me** to attend because I want to major in global studies, **then*** it would be a statement of personal preference. With the addition of "for me," the writer is stating a point of view about the best university for him or her to attend. You cannot argue with a person's individual preference.
    - In the original example, the writer stated that *"BU is the best university in the world to attend if you want to major in global studies."* That **can** be reasonably disagreed with, as someone could point out that other universities have excellent programs in global studies and compare them with BU's. Do you see the difference, now, between a claim and a statement of personal preference?
8. Now that we know what a claim is, we will look at creating and evaluating claims.

## Video 2: Creating and Evaluating Claims

1. The claim is the most important part of your argument, because it is the foundation of your argument. Everything in your argument stems from the claim. You need a strong claim to write a good argument; if your claim is weak, your argument will be weak, too.
2. What are some characteristics of a strong claim? A strong claim is:
  - significant (or important)
  - has substantial, credible evidence available to support it

- interests you and is something you want to write about
3. That makes sense, but how do you begin to come up with a claim?
- First, identify the topic about which you will be writing. It might be a political controversy, such as a proposed new law, or candidates for political office; or a scientific debate (for example, whether life is sustainable on Mars); or a written work or film. **In academic writing based on reading, you will have to discover a point in the original text about which you will build an argument.**
  - Then, you can use one of several techniques to generate ideas for your claim, such as freewriting, brainstorming, and asking questions.
  - For now, let's consider brainstorming as a way to generate ideas for your claim. Let your mind roam freely about the topic and write down any ideas you have, without worrying about whether you think they are good ideas.
    - For example, if the topic is a proposed law, consider the potential benefit or harm the law might cause and write down as many ideas as you can think of in favor or against the new law.
    - If you're developing a claim about a novel, think about the novel's theme, action, and characters. Do you think the outcome would have been different if one of the characters had acted differently, for example?
  - Remember, this list is just your first step. It's not yet time to develop and evaluate your claims.
4. Now that you've created a list of ideas for your claim, it's time to narrow down your list by evaluating each idea.
- First, make sure each idea is arguable, and not a statement of fact or personal preference. If it is not arguable, decide whether you want to discard that idea or revise it so that it is arguable.
  - Next, evaluate each claim against the three items on the list of characteristics of a strong claim.
    - Is the claim you are making important?
    - Do you have or – if you have not yet started to do research - do you think you will be able to find substantial and credible evidence to support it?
    - Is the claim an idea that interests you and you'd like to write about?
  - Look at your list and cross out any ideas that do not meet these three characteristics.

- If you have more than two ideas remaining on your list, decide which two best meet the requirements of the assignment your instructor has given you and are most interesting to you, and cross out the others.
- 5. Now you have two ideas to work with. It's time to develop each of those ideas into a well-written claim. For each, draft a claim that states your position clearly, specifically, and briefly.
- 6. Don't spend too much time revising and polishing your claim to try to make it "perfect." As you work on your argument, your ideas will become clearer and you'll revise your claim to reflect how your thinking has developed. Therefore, don't spend a great deal of time rewriting and revising your claim at the start.
- 7. Now that you have a claim, you'll need to collect and organize your ideas for your argument.

### **Video 3: The Structure of An Argument**

- Let's review what an argument is before we discuss how to structure an argument. As we said in Video 1, the purpose of an argument is to persuade the audience – that is, the person who reads your argument – of the validity of your point of view.
- Your goal is to convince your audience that you are right, but that's not always possible. Realistically, then, your objective when writing an academic argument, is to convince your readers that your argument is well-reasoned and worth considering, even if they do not adopt your specific viewpoint.
- To achieve that objective, you must present the elements of your argument in an organized and logical manner. You will present your claim, support it with credible evidence, identify and respond to opposing views (called *counterarguments*), and conclude by summarizing how all of these elements demonstrate the strength of your position.
- This is the customary sequence for structuring an argument:
  - In the introduction, state your topic and claim.
  - In the body, present the evidence to support your claim and the counterarguments to your claim.
  - In the conclusion, or "closing argument," repeat your claim, briefly summarize the evidence you have presented, and highlight how that evidence provides strong support for the validity of your claim.
- Let's examine this structure in a famous argument with which many of you are familiar, the text of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech. We'll look at the text together.)

- In the introduction, Dr. King introduces his **topic**, the freeing of African-Americans (then referred to as Negroes) from slavery by the Emancipation Proclamation, and the promise that they would have the same rights as other American citizens.
- In the next few paragraphs, he states his **claim**, that despite this promise, African-Americans still were not free because of racial segregation, discrimination, and their resultant poverty, and that African-Americans were prepared to do whatever was necessary to achieve true freedom, justice, and equality.
- In the body of his speech, Dr. King presents evidence to his two audiences, America as a nation, and African-American citizens of the U.S. He reminds America of actions that African-Americans had taken to gain their civil rights as evidence of their resolve to continue taking those actions until they achieved true equality. He also presents evidence to convince African-Americans
- that they must continue their struggle for civil rights in pursuance of the dream of equality, regardless of the personal cost to them.
- Dr. King concludes that when these actions are taken to make “freedom ring” throughout the United States, African-Americans would achieve true liberty, and equality.
- Most people who read or hear the “Dream” speech find it powerful and convincing. It’s a good endorsement of the traditional structure of an argument, don’t you think?