

NOTES ON WRITING EFFECTIVE CLAIMS (Thesis Statements)

A claim is a generalization—an assertion about the text—requiring proof or further development. It combines topic with point of view. The claim presents the controlling idea of the paper. An effective claim is sharply focused and limited enough to be covered in the prescribed length of the essay. A claim must also answer the question: So what? Why/how does this issue matter to readers?

What does it mean to make an argument about a text?

Arguing about a text involves interpreting the text and defending the interpretation as reasonable. The goal of such an argument is to clearly explain a point of view (our thesis) about the text to convince readers that this point of view is valid based on evidence within the text. The kinds of arguments we will be making about texts do not involve research, nor are they opportunities to vent personal beliefs about a topic. Rather, they involve reading closely and exploring multiple ways of understanding how a text works. In formulating an argument, we make a claim about the text, a claim that attempts to explain how a particular element of the text functions within the text. We are seeking insights into how the text works, how a particular element contributes to (or possibly detracts from) its meaning.

AN EFFECTIVE CLAIM SHOULD BE...

1. 1-2 sentences long at the end of your introduction paragraph
2. Debatable (your claim should not merely be a statement of fact or summary – you need to take a position on the text under analysis in your paper)
3. Interesting (focus on the most interesting elements of the text/topic that you're analyzing)
4. Clear and specific language presenting reasons for your position

Try to avoid the following types of claims:

1. The “discussion” thesis: In this paper, I will discuss A, B, and C.
The purpose of this essay is to discuss Roberts’ analysis of the evolution of English.

Solution: Improve the thesis by taking a position:

Roberts’ analysis of the evolution of English is a clear and objective historical account.

2. The grandiose generalization: *Douglass’ narrative is the most powerful account of a slave’s quest for education that I have ever read.*

Solution: Avoid the value judgment, narrow the focus, and stick to points that can be proven:

Douglass’ courage and inventiveness in attaining education make his experiences unusual during slavery times.

3. The vague thesis: *Douglass and Roberts have different views on the role of education.*

Solution: Get specific:

Douglass presents a more compelling view of education through his use of personal narrative and emotional appeal.

NOTES ON PLANNING YOUR ARGUMENT: CLAIM, REASONS, EVIDENCE

Introduction: Since your paper is not long, you will only want to have a few sentences of very strategic background. This background should be primarily taken from the essay to which you are responding. You will then interrupt the “status quo” established by this essay by drawing attention to a tension that can lead directly to the central claim of your paper.

Your **claim** needs to respond to a specific aspect of the other essay’s argument and either:

1. Agree but incorporate pertinent new evidence in order to expand the writer’s ideas
2. Disagree and clearly explain why
3. Agree and disagree in specific ways or reframe the central question / debate

*Your claim must be arguable – you must be able to imagine a counterargument. This opposing stance does not have to be the exact inversion of your claim and it does not have to be as convincing an argument as you believe your argument to be – but it has to be possible.

*You don’t necessarily need to list out your main reasons as part of your claim, but each of your body paragraphs should be clearly focused on a specific **reason** that supports your claim.

*You will support and explain the central focus of each paragraph with **evidence**. Although in any situation you will be responding to your chosen essay and providing evidence, depending on the specific structure of your claim, your paragraphs will take different forms. If you are agreeing with the essay writer’s stance and adding new examples, your body paragraphs will mostly consist of these examples and your analysis of them. If you are disagreeing, you will quote more specific points from the essay and acknowledge and respond to those points. If you are both agreeing and disagreeing, you will also likely quote quite a bit from the essay to which you are responding.