

Making Sure You Have an Arguable Claim

We live in a world that requires us to make arguments fairly often. Whether in the form of a love letter or a statement of purpose for an application, argumentative writing, when done skillfully, helps us to achieve our goals. Good argumentative writing persuades readers to see and accept a particular point of view. Arguable claims attempt to convince readers of something, change their minds about something, or persuade them to think about something in a new way. Such claims address a question or problem to which no easy answer exists and deal with complex issues by presenting positions that take into account as many potential responses as possible. In order to convince doubtful readers, arguable claims must be supported with carefully worked out analysis and substantial textual evidence. We should also keep in mind that an argumentative essay is generally most interesting and persuasive when the writer is presenting ideas that are meaningful to them and therefore give purpose to the essay. This makes it important that you develop the argument you make in your essay around a claim that is interesting and valuable to you.

There are many types of claims that one can make (most statements claim something), but in this class we are looking for *arguable* claims. To be sure that your claim is indeed arguable, ask yourself the following questions:

COULD ANY REASONABLE PERSON DISAGREE WITH YOUR CLAIM?

This is the first question to ask, and the answer should be “Yes.” If it is unlikely that anyone would disagree with your claim, then you don’t have an arguable claim—you have an obvious one. Obvious claims can be tricky because they may seem arguable. They can be supported by textual evidence, but they are not complex enough to require any deep engagement with the texts. These claims often reduce issues down to an inaccurately simple, neat residue that is easily swept away. If you can’t imagine an opposing argument, your claim is probably obvious.

IS YOUR CLAIM SIMPLY A QUESTION OF FACT?

There are factual claims that can reasonably be disputed. For example, much of the argumentation that goes on in courtrooms has to do with demonstrating that certain things did or did not happen. Tabloid news articles often make claims about events that aren’t necessarily true. But these aren’t *arguable* claims. These types of claims can, in theory at least, be factually verified or refuted. In this course, you will likely use arguments of fact *to support* your central claim, but your central claim should *not* be easily verifiable by some objective standard. If it’s easily proven, it’s not worth arguing for.

IS YOUR CLAIM SUPPORTED MOSTLY BY PERSONAL OPINIONS OR VALUES?

Some claims are not arguable, because their truth is entirely dependant on personal preferences and beliefs. For example, there is no point in arguing about what my favorite color is—it is, after all, *my* favorite color. A more realistic example would have to do with arguments that hinge totally upon deeply ingrained personal values. As statements of opinion, claims of this sort are impossible to prove. They are often based on beliefs that are considered unquestionable, and they therefore allow for little, if any, genuine engagement with, or analysis of, the readings for this course. Opinions are not arguable because no one can offer alternative perspectives on your opinions. While statements of opinion can be persuasive, they rely on the assumption that readers will naturally feel as you do. Rather than offering the type of well-supported argument that actually might change a resistant

reader's mind, opinion claims count on a reader to come to your essay already sharing your perspective.

CAN YOU SUPPORT YOUR CLAIM CONVINCINGLY USING THE SOURCES AVAILABLE?

Your argument should be persuasively supported by textual evidence and analysis. It is possible to make claims that extend beyond what can be supported by the texts you are using. These difficult claims are problematic because they generally venture off into the realm of pure conjecture. They are impossible to argue because they try to extend themselves beyond what can be reasonably supported.

CAN YOU MAKE A THOROUGH ARGUMENT FOR YOUR CLAIM WITHIN THE SCOPE OF THE ASSIGNMENT?

You need to make sure that the scope of your claim is specific enough to be argued thoroughly in 8-10 (double-spaced) pages. In other words, we are interested in depth of analysis rather than breadth of coverage. Don't, however, be discouraged if it doesn't seem like you can fit everything into your paper—some points in your argument will probably need to be carefully qualified. Almost any argument can be extended indefinitely, but you'll need to *demonstrate your claim persuasively* (as opposed to prove irrefutably) within the length requirements of the assignment.

IS YOUR CLAIM INTERESTING?

Your argument is most likely to be powerfully persuasive if you feel personally invested in the claim for which you are arguing. A boring claim can only result in a boring essay. Arguable claims require a lot of evidence and a level of thinking that extends beyond opinion and beyond the obvious. Arguable claims attempt to convince readers, change their minds, or urge them to think in new ways. Such claims address a problem for which a single, simple answer does *not* exist. If your claim sounds risky and you're not sure that you can convince everyone, then you've probably come up with an arguable claim!