

ARGUMENTATIVE CLAIM FORMULATION ACTIVITY

Overview

A claim is the skin and the exterior, the tip and leading edge, of an argument. This is why when people ask what arguments someone is making, it is common and quite proper to respond by relating their argumentative claims. Claims are short-hand for arguments; one's argumentative claims are unevidenced arguments, and one's arguments are evidenced claims.

The strength of the claim is in some fundamental ways the strength of one's idea. Formulation of the argumentative claim is deceptively difficult. Getting your argumentative claim just right is getting your idea, your viewpoint, your interpretation just right.

So, how do we know whether our formulation of the argumentative claim is just right? How do we judge the strength of argumentative claims, when we're assessing the strength and quality of argumentation? Well, there are four criteria that are widely used to guide successful claim formulation and assess argumentative claims. They can each be applied through a series of evaluative questions.

Clarity

Argumentative claims should clearly and lucidly represent the writer or speaker's idea. The reason that their position is true should be easily understood by the formulation of the claim.

Evaluative questions: Are the argumentative claims clear? Are the writer's points made precisely? Do the claims clearly support the writer's overall argumentative position?

Focus

Each argumentative claim should be a single reason that the overall position, or thesis, is true. An argumentative claim should be focused on a honed, precise, single point,



half-way between the generality of the overall position and the detail of the evidence that supports it.

Evaluative questions: Are the argumentative claims each focused on a single point? Are they properly balanced between the detail of evidence and the generality of the overall argumentative position?

Organization

Argumentative claims should organize the overall argumentation of a writer or speaker, and should establish a relationship between, and separation of, the reasons that their overall position is true. All of the affirmative, pointed ideas about the issue should be in some ways organized by the claims the writer or speaker is making.

Evaluative questions: Are the argumentative claims separate and distinct from each other? Or do they overlap with or repeat each other? Do they assemble into a coherent overall argument for the position?

Directedness

A fundamental requirement of argumentative claims is that they are all supportive of the writer or speaker's overall position. Even if that position has to be modified or qualified by counter-arguments, in its ultimate form it has to direct all of the claims. Directedness also implies that claims are approximately equal, that they are proportional, in their support of the position.

Evaluative questions: Are the argumentative claims directed by a single overall position? Are the argumentative claims consistent with each other? Or do they contradict each other? Are they parallel with each other, or do they seem unmatched?



Method and Procedure

1. Produce and review a model argumentative claim formulation, assessing it relative to all four criteria.
2. Then, each student should formulate claims in response to the questions below.
3. After students have been given an adequate amount of time to complete their claim formulations, the teacher should cold-call a student to read their claim formulation to the first question.
4. The teacher should then cold-call a second student and ask if they think that their argument formulation is better than the first on any of the four criteria. If the answer is no, then the teacher should cold-call another two students and repeat the process. If the answer is no a second time, the teacher should analyze the differences between the two claim formulations on the question for the class, awarding the better of the two with . . . bonus points? a classroom privilege of some kind? a small piece of candy (perhaps sugarless)? a simple recognition?
5. If the answer is yes (from the second student the first time, or the second time), then the student should read their argumentative claim. The teacher should then cold-call a third student and ask them to evaluate the two claims on each of the four criteria, identifying which claim is preferable on each criterion and which claim is better overall. To do this, both students will need to re-read their argumentative claims at least once.
6. Repeat steps 3 – 5 until all of the questions have been completed.
7. Collect and formatively assess each student's argumentative claim formulations.



Argumentative Claim Formulation

For each of the following questions, formulate an argumentative claim that performs well in relation to the above criteria: clarity, focus, organization, and directedness.

1) For this question, assume that your overall position is that the school year should be extended to a year-round calendar, with periodic three-week breaks taking the place of the long summer vacation.

One argument that you're making is that year-round education prevents students from experiencing the "summer slide" which is when students forget much of what they learned the previous year.

Formulate another argumentative claim: _____

2) For this question, assume that your overall position is that the social media is actually harmful for young people, on balance.

One argument that you're making is that social media isolates young people from each other because it replaces genuine in-person social relationships with artificial on-line "friendships" that don't let young people really get to know each other.

Formulate another argumentative claim: _____



3) For this question, assume that your overall position is that the United States is the greatest positive influence on countries around the world.

One argument that you're making is that the U.S. Constitution has been copied by many countries because it enshrines individual liberties, such as freedom of speech, religion, equal protection under law. Another argument that you're making is that the U.S. economy is a model to the world because it promotes create innovation, as in the technology field which has been a consistent world leader in this field.

Formulate another argumentative claim: _____

4) For this question, assume that your overall position is that the United States was not justified in dropping atomic bombs on Japan during World War II.

One argument that you're making is that tens of thousands of innocent civilians were killed in Hiroshima and Nagasaki when the U.S. dropped atomic bombs on these two Japanese cities in the summer of 1945.

Formulate another argumentative claim: _____



5) For this question, assume that your overall position is that African-Americans have made an unquestionable and brilliant contribution to American arts in the 20th century, despite discrimination that held black people back economically and socially.

One argument that you're making is that African-American blues musicians, such as Muddy Waters and Howlin' Wolf, were the original inspiration for rock and roll, perhaps America's greatest cultural contribution to the world in the 20th century.

Formulate another argumentative claim: _____

6) For this question, assume that you are arguing that public college should not be free in the United States.

One argument that you're making is that free public college would lead a lot of young people to enroll in college who weren't serious about taking on the academic work of college and would therefore diminish the educational value of public college classes and a public college degree. Another argument you're making is that the federal and state governments in the U.S. are in deep debt and cannot afford the trillion or so dollars that free public college would cost every year if it were offered to every American interested in taking courses at public colleges.

Formulate another argumentative claim: _____
