

Lecture3:Claims and Evidencein Academic Writing

Academic writing entails a wide range of content that transports the writer's perspectives about the topic under study. The aim is to persuade, argue, prove or suggest something to the reader. This academic content falls generally under two broad categories: claims and evidence.

1. Claims

The common belief about claims is that they are mere opinions on a given topic. In fact, they need to provoke a debatable stand point that should be supported by evidence.

What is a claim?

“Claims are the points you want to prove, interpretations you want to offer, and assertions you want to make” (Heady 2007: 59). Views on politics, religion, society, history and other domains that include personal stands are often academic claims unless they express a non-academic opposition as they do not have a debatable nature. By nature, academic claims are arguable and far from rough and aggressive expression of personal viewpoints. They also have to be assertive and not passive to show how well the writer is familiar and knowledgeable about his/her topic..

Consider these examples (UW Expository Writing Program handouts 2007: 2).

Opinion:

- Twinkies are delicious.
- I like dance music.
- I think Virginia Woolf is better than James Joyce.
- The governor is a bad man.
- The Faculty of Economics and Business Administration does not provide good education to students.

Argument/Arguable claim:

- Twinkies taste better than other snack cakes because of their texture, their creamy filling, and their golden appearance.
- Dance music has become popular for reasons that have nothing to do with the quality of the music; rather, the clear, fast beats respond to the need of people on amphetamines to move, and to move quickly.

- Virginia Woolf is a more effective writer than James Joyce because she does not rely on elaborate language devices that ultimately confuse and alienate the reader.
- The governor has continually done the community a disservice by mishandling money, focusing on frivolous causes, and failing to listen to his constituents.
- The Faculty of Economics and Business Administration fails to provide a good education because the staff and students are not culturally diverse.

Characteristics of a good claim

The writer’s claim in an academic paper represents his/her main thesis statement that is supposed to be supported by evidence, details and arguments. Therefore, it should be focused and debatable. For example, claiming that traditional classroom is boring is not a good claim; however, claiming that “traditional classroom does not provide sufficient interaction with students and is limited in time and place” is a good argumentative claim.

Descriptive thesis statements are not good claims because they “do not investigate anything, critique anything, or analyze anything [...] they also do not invite support and argument from outside of the central text” (UW Expository Writing Program handouts 2007:2). These two examples are not good claims because he/she uses a descriptive tone to express an unarguable idea.

- “Shakespeare’s Romeo and Juliet is a play about two star crossed lovers and two warring families.”
- “In the excerpt from One Writer’s Beginnings, Eudora Welty conveys a positive tone toward her childhood experience. She accomplishes this through the use of descriptive diction, impressionable images, and unusual syntax.”

Generally speaking, argumentative claims may combine affirmation, acknowledgement, confirmation, refutation, and compromise. They are often provocative, analytical, and interpretive rather than descriptive or factual statements. Therefore, they need to appear in topic sentences, thesis statements, introductory and concluding sentences/paragraphs.

2. Evidence

While claims appear at the beginning or the end of paragraphs, evidence is the material that feeds the body. The nature of the discipline determines what supporting materials may be included as evidence. This may range from quotations and citations to facts and statistics. The ultimate aim is to elaborate the subject according to the academic nature of the written piece.

What is evidence?

Following Heady (2007:60), evidence is “the material you use to back up your claims”. It is the elaboration of the central claim of the topic via a wide range of materials. The aim is not to win the argument or “to have the last word” (Hacker 2009:359) but to demonstrate an understanding of the debatable issue and suggest the best solution to the problem under investigation.

Elaboration of evidence

To construct well your evidence, the elaboration of the materials can be temporal, analytical, deductive, inductive, dialectical or enumerational (Hannay and Mackenzie 1996, in Mennence & Wilkinson 2002).

To start with, temporal elaboration of evidence relies on the chronological sequencing of events. It fits best historical writings that aim to track the occurrence of events. Historical facts, scripts, citations of historians’ speeches are among the best types of evidence that are often used in historical papers.

Particularizing and exemplifying a generality are the supporting evidence used to elaborate analytical writings. When stating a general claim in a paragraph, specifying and illustrating its elements for analytical purposes is the appropriate elaboration for scientific writings. To do so, inserting figures, tables, and other visuals strengthens your claim and gives your evidence a methodical and logical appearance.

When it comes to deductive evidence, the writer generally introduces an assertive claim that needs to be just confirmed by arguments. Quotations from previous studies on the same subject may work well for this evidence. Unlike the deductive elaboration, inductive elaboration begins with uncertain claim of unobvious validity that needs to be asserted. Any illustration, citation or other facts about the claim which aim to make it valid and certain is appropriate evidence for inductive elaboration.

Dialectical elaboration introduces both the arguments and the counter-arguments in the same paragraph or chapter and makes a synthesis at the end. Therefore, looking for opposing views and conflicting statements on the same subject in the literature or any other documents is what dialectical elaboration depends on. Persuasive and expository writings use most this type of elaboration.

Finally, enumerational elaboration presents a quantity of evidence and sticks to it. If the writer lists in the claim certain number of views on the subject, then the body develops it accordingly. Any piece of writing of time or logical order may benefit from enumerational elaboration.

Types of evidence

Heady (2007:60) lists the following types as the most used ones in academic writings.

- Quotations from books, poems, or other texts
- Citations from critical articles
- Data from studies
- Personal experience
- Facts and statistics
- Historical facts
- Scripture
- Logical argumentation

Beginner researcher may find it difficult to obtain evidence for his/her claims. Hacker (2009: 358) categorizes the types of evidence according to the academic discipline of the writer.

a. Humanities: literature and history

- Passages of a fiction or nonfiction work or lines of a poem
- First hand sources such as photographs, letters, maps, and government documents
- Scholarly books and articles
- Critical essays that analyze original works such as books, poems, films, music, or works of art

b. Social sciences: Psychology, sociology, political science, and education

- Data from original experiments
- Results of field research such as interviews, observations, or surveys
- Reports that interpret or analyze data or that place data in context

References

1. Hacker, D.(2009).*Rulesforwriters:6thedition*.NewYork.Bedford/St. Martin's
2. Heady, E.(2007). *Introduction to graduate writing*. Australia. Liberty University Graduate Writing Center.
3. Mennens MSc, H. &Wilkinson MSc, B. (2002). *Academic writing skills*. University of Maastricht.
4. UW Expository Writing Program handouts (2007). *Claims,claims,claims*. Washington. Courtesy the Odegaard Writing & Research Center

Classroom Practice

Practice1: Make two of these opinions arguable claims.

Opinions

- Female students of English perform better than male students.
- George Washington was the best American president.
- English is an easy language to learn
- Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* is a great American novel
- The right to bear arms in the United States is not acceptable.
- There is a lot of symbolism in *The Scarlet Letter*

Practice2: read these claims and write a different version to two of them.

Claims

- If the West were to consider its long-term interests, its leaders would appreciate the need to become more active in dialogue with popular movements in North Africa and the Middle East.
- Any decision to place restrictions on the free movement of capital should follow from a careful consideration of the pros and cons of the freedoms enshrined in the European Union.
- Many educational reforms in Algeria in the last decade failed to address the right instructional issues because high expectations were based on outcomes rather than on procedures and strategies.
- The Faculty of Foreign Languages Administration fails to provide a good education because the staff and students are not culturally diverse.
- The character of the Nurse in *Romeo and Juliet* serves as a foil to young Juliet delights us with her warmth and earthy wit, and helps realize the tragic catastrophe.
- In "The Masque of the Red Death," Poe uses the symbolism of the stranger, the clock, and the seventh room to develop the theme of death.

Practice 3: consider the stated claims in these extracts. Are they descriptive or argumentative/persuasive? (Solomon 2013: 99)

- Approximately 800,000 people died in the genocide in Rwanda. These were predominantly people from the Tutsi ethnic group.
- The genocide in Rwanda was entirely preventable.
- Policymakers at the United Nations were aware that the Tutsi people were being targeted for elimination. However, there are many complex factors that account for their inaction in preventing the mass slaughter.

Practice 4: what type of evidence is used to support the claims below?

Examples

Citations

Previous studies

Direct quotations

Findings of previous research

Study results

Others

1.

There are certain aspects of language processing that may not decline with age and may actually improve. One of the greatest gains is seen in vocabulary (Bayley and Oden, 1955; Jones, 1959). However, older individuals have difficulty in retrieving or accessing these words and exhibit a greater number of tip-of-the-tongue responses than do young individuals during retrieval (Bowles and Poon, 1985). (Martin, *et al.*, 2007: 491)

2.

Most road traffic accidents occur between four and six o'clock in the morning, with a second, slightly smaller peak occurring in the middle of the afternoon (Home and Reyner 1999). Most researchers attribute this finding to sleeplessness and/or fatigue. A lack of sleep seems to exacerbate driving performance as does a feeling of fatigue and the ingestion of carbohydrates (London *et al.*, 2004). (Martin *et al.*, 2007: 385)

3.

What's in a name?

The issue of language has been hugely important in thinking about ways to address the discrimination and oppression of disabled people. Neil Thompson, a social work academic, writer and former practitioner states, 'The language we use either reinforces discrimination through constructing it as normal or contributes in some small way at least to undermining the continuance of a discriminatory discourse' (2007: 39). The debate on language is ongoing, for example, in changing terms used to describe people who are in receipt of welfare services from 'clients' to 'service users' or 'customers' and more recently in the move to discuss 'safeguarding' children rather than 'child protection'. In terms of disability, using 'person first' terminology has been one cause for debate. Some disabled adults endorse person first terminology (e.g. people with disabilities) stating that the person comes before the disability (Datillo and Smith, 1990; Kailes, 1985; Millington and Leierer, 1996). Others argue that a person's disability is part of their identity in much the same way as their ethnicity or gender is. (Wilson *et al.*, 2008: 540)

4.

Rivers vary greatly in appearance with changes both from source to mouth and between individual rivers. It is this morphological diversity that is the fascination for many people. In the case of Europe, contrast the quietly flowing small chalk-fed streams shaded by overhanging willows of southern England with the turbulent milky-coloured torrents draining glacial regions of the Alps.

The size, shape and location of a river can also be transformed overnight by a single large flood, by depositing sediment in some areas and reactivating other reaches by erosion. Few people in the United Kingdom will, for example, have escaped seeing the horrifying images of the destructive forces of the flood that hit the small Cornish village of Boscastle, England in the summer of 2004. (Holden, 2008: 381)

It was once thought that distraction was enough to help people take their mind off pain. Some studies, however, have shown that it is not necessarily distraction that is responsible for reducing pain but rather the emotional quality of the distractor. Positive stimuli, such as humour and laughter, are known to reduce pain perception (Cogan *et al.*, 1987; Rotton and Shats, 1996) but increasing the attention required to complete cognitive tasks (distraction without emotion) does not (McCaul and Malott, 1984). (Martin *et al.*, 2007: 376)

5.

Even at an early age girls are out-performing boys in English:

- at age 7, 85% of girls gained a level 2+ while only 72% of boys achieved this
- some 30% of girls attained a level 3 and only 20% of boys, and by the end of primary schooling girls are on average half a level ahead of boys in English
- national statistics show that this gap continues and widens until GCSE, where the gap in performance in English is one of the highest. (Davies, 2006: 36–7)

6.

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(Wilson *et al.*, 2008: 540)

7.

¹During the past 10 years, the use of computers in education has increased dramatically and a wide range of educational computer programmes are now widely available for individual and classroom use. ²However, there has been very little research reported on the effectiveness of such use. ³The purpose of the present study was therefore to ascertain the effectiveness of using computer-assisted instruction as compared to traditional classroom instruction in an EAP writing class. ⁴The findings clearly suggest that the inclusion of web-based materials in EAP writing courses for post-graduate students from East-Asia on an English language preparation course is effective. ⁵Further research is needed, however, before the use of such materials can be recommended for all students in all subject areas at all levels.

(Gillett and Weetman, 2006)

Sources

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- Learningdevelopment(2012).Presentingnumericaldata.Uk.Universityof Leicester
- Solomon,G.(2013).Just Write It! How to develop top-Class University writing skill. Uk. Open University press.