

Claim Types

CLASS LECTURE NOTES

Identifying Types of Claims in Your Papers

Background: Models of Argument

Most textbooks for College Composition devote a chapter to the **Classical Model** of argument (the Aristotelian method, they call it, after Aristotle, inventor of argument); another to the **Toulmin Model** (after Stephen Toulmin, 20th century philosopher and nasty arguer who made claims, backed them up, and went into every fight hoping to win); and a third to the **Rogerian Model** (for Carl Rogers, wimpier, more humanistic, non-threatening arguer who hoped in every encounter to arrive at consensus).

- **Aristotle** made appeals to his audience's **reason** (logos), to their **emotions** (pathos), and to their sense of **ethics, character, and authority** (ethos), without ever calling anything a claim.
- **Toulmin** made **claims** (the thesis is the first claim, followed by many smaller claims), supported them with **grounds** (we'd call it evidence), based his arguments on **warrants** (the values on which the argument rests), which in turn rest on **backing** (which no textbook adequately explains and which perplexes students and professors alike).
- Rogers concentrated on finding areas of **common ground** and solving **shared problems**. After identifying where we agree, he examined **differences of opinion** or perhaps misunderstandings, compare recommended **solutions** and their **limitations**, then offer ways to **resolve differences**.

Claims are Assertions Open to Challenge

All three argument models make claims, though only Toulmin uses the term. Your thesis, your premise, your central assumption, is a *claim* because, as the terms suggest, what you intend to prove is an assertion that is *open to challenge*.

We've used the term in class so far to mean any assertion—even unstated assertions—that readers must accept for the paper to be persuasive.

Not all claims need to be proved.

- Unstated claims often go by unnoticed and require no proof.
- Claims to which no readers would be likely to object can safely be made without proof.
- Claims that would be readily accepted by your intended audience require no proof.

For the most part, though, as writers we need to be very aware of the types of claims we make and what sort of evidence—and how much—it will take to convince our readers that our claims are valid.

Your Paper is the Calm Voice in the Room

Imagine one of those heated discussions on a public topic like gun control in which participants shout out their particular objections to a proposed new regulation, or their equally passionate demands for regulation, and try to characterize their opponents as either gun nuts with a screw loose or communists who don't want to protect their families and would roll over for an armed invader.

There are claims from every angle, rebuttals that have no connection to the claim they intend to refute, very little actual communication in evidence, and no real argument as we like to define argument.

Your paper is that calm voice from the back that asks, "What are we actually disagreeing about here? Are we debating whether the government should enact gun control? Or whether it has the right to enact gun control? Whether private gun ownership prevents crime? Whether gun ownership, like driving a car, can be restricted and licensed?"

Your paper, like that voice, recognizes the futility of arguing without making and defending clear claims. That voice, like your paper, is applying the concept of claim types to get the argument focused.

Let's Take an Example

Cassie Hoffman wants to get rid of her glasses and undergo lasik surgery. It's still elective surgery not covered by insurance.

- She'd like to talk her parents into covering a portion of the cost, say 100%.
- She'd like to convince the insurance company to cover the cost, say 100%

Cassie has two audiences to convince. She will make claims to both audiences as she argues that she is the only person in the room who should not pay. She may not recognize what she's doing until the end of the semester, but Cassie will be using claim types to identify points of disagreement for her two audiences.

First, we'll examine the types of claims to be proved when Cassie argues with her parents.

Categorical Claims to the Parents

Cassie's mom has read about serious complications, especially for young candidates, and anyway, how much better will her eyesight be, and is it worth the risk? Plus her friend's friend knew someone who got an infection. Plus, don't doctors prefer patients in their mid-twenties at least? Cassie needs to convince her audience that lasik is safe and effective, also that she is a good candidate.

Her arguments are based on categorical claims.

- Lasik *belongs to the category* effective surgeries.
- Lasik *belongs to the category* safe procedures for twenty-year-olds.
- Cassie *belongs to the category* good candidates for lasik.

Definitional Claims to the Parents

Cassie's dad remembers earlier controversies about radial keratotomy, a procedure developed by Russian doctors that used a scalpel to cut the cornea. Cassie needs to make dad understand exactly what the modern procedure of lasik is, now that lasers do the cutting. Otherwise, her argument with dad will be of the "Yes, it is the same thing," "No, it's not the same thing" variety.

Her arguments are based on definitional claims.

- Radial keratotomy *is* a discredited experimental procedure using scalpels.
- Lasik *is* advanced technologically-proven laser surgery.

Causal Claims to the Parents

Both parents want to know what motivates Cassie to want something so expensive in the first place. Cassie's dad has always worn glasses and isn't considering lasik for himself. Cassie needs to convince dad that permanent correction of her nearsightedness will improve her quality of life, her academic achievement, and her professional life. For the sake of argument, she turns her scuba diving hobby into a career plan. Glasses and contacts are serious handicaps for scuba divers; Cassie has a keen interest in marine biology; lasik will improve her professional opportunities.

Her arguments are based on causal claims.

- Glasses and contacts *cause serious problems* for divers.
- Lasik would *solve a serious problem* for Cassie.
- Easier access to underwater research *would result in* professional advantages.

Resemblance Claims to the Parents

Cassie's dad wears glasses and her mom wears contacts; therefore, they reason, Cassie can correct her vision without the risk and expense of lasik surgery. Cassie asks her parents to consider what it would have been like for them to go without eye correction when they were her age. At one time glasses represented the best solution and only the poor would have denied their children glasses. When contacts became available, Mom decided the advantages of contacts were worth the expense and the risk of putting lenses directly on her eyeballs. Today, the best eyecare choice is the one-time investment in permanent surgical correction.

Her arguments are based on resemblance claims.

- Lasik today *resembles* eyeglasses and contacts lenses of yesterday.
- Cassie's situation *resembles* her parents' situations in their youth.
- The best solution for Cassie *resembles* the best solution for earlier generations.
- The costs and risks of lasik now *resemble* the costs and risks of earlier remedies.

Evaluation Claims to the Parents

When all is said and done, pluses balanced against minuses, does lasik represent the right treatment for Cassie's nearsightedness? Do the risks justify the results? Does the higher initial cost of lasik pay off versus a lifetime supply of glasses and contacts? Are the psychological benefits and the professional enhancements enough to break a tie if needed? Cassie doesn't refute the legitimacy of cost and risk concerns, but minimizes them by fairly evaluating the evidence.

Her arguments are based on evaluation claims.

- Risks are minimal *compared to* proven results.
- The high initial investment is a bargain *compared to* a lifetime of escalating expenses.
- The psychological and career *benefits are not balanced by any benefits* of glasses.

Proposal Claims to the Parents

Should young adults get this operation for treatment of myopia? Specifically, should 20-year-olds get the procedure? More specifically, should Cassie get the procedure; and finally, should her parents pay for the procedure? Stated as an arguable, valuable proposal: Cassie's parents should pay for her lasik surgery while she's still 20.

Her arguments will usually follow a problem/solution/justification structure.

- The first section convinces Cassie's parents that a problem exists.
- The second section proposes the solution to the problem.
- The last section justifies the solution by demonstrating that the benefits of acting outweigh the costs; or
- The inherent "rightness" of the solution on moral or ethical grounds compels action.

EXERCISE WORKSHEET

The Argument to Cassie’s Parents:

The Parents Should Pay for Cassie’s Lasik Surgery

Categorical Claims	Definitional Claims	Consequential Claims	Resemblance Claims	Evaluation Claims	Proposal Claims
Is X a Y ?	What is a Y ?	Does X Cause Y ?	Is X like Y ?	Is X good or bad? Is X a good Y ?	Should we do X ?
Lasik is a safe procedure.	Radial keratotomy is a discredited procedure using scalpels.	Glasses and contacts cause serious problems for divers.	Today’s lasik is like yesterday’s glasses and contacts.	Risks are minimal compared to proven results of lasik.	Myopia detracts from Cassie’s quality of life and could restrict her career.
Lasik is an effective procedure.		Underwater research would result in professional advantages for Cassie.	Cassie’s situation is like her parents’ in their youth.	High initial costs are a bargain compared to lifetime savings.	
Cassie is a good candidate for lasik.	Lasik is advanced technologically proven laser surgery.	Lasik would solve a serious eye problem.	Cassie’s solution resembles earlier solutions.	Psychological and professional benefits are in themselves good things, not balanced by any comparable good things on the other side of the argument.	Lasik solves the problem and gives Cassie an edge in school and in her career.
Lasik is not a form of radial keratotomy.			Lasik’s costs are comparable to other remedies in their day.		Benefits far outweigh the costs of the solution.

The Argument to the Health Care Industry:

Insurance Companies Should Pay for Lasik Surgery

Categorical Claims	Definitional Claims	Consequential Claims	Resemblance Claims	Evaluation Claims	Proposal Claims
Is X a Y ?	What is a Y ?	Does X Cause Y ?	Is X like Y ?	Is X good or bad? Is X a good Y ?	Should we do X ?

PERSONAL ASSESSMENT WORKSHEET

Claims I've Made in my Short Papers so far

Thesis: Replace this line with a clear statement of your thesis.
(The thesis is always a type of claim, not always but sometimes a proposal.)

Categorical Claims	Definitional Claims	Consequential Claims	Resemblance Claims	Evaluation Claims	Proposal Claims
Is X a Y?	What is a Y?	Does X Cause Y?	Is X like Y?	Is X good or bad? Is X a good Y?	Should we do X?

Additional Claims I Should Have Made (now that I think about it).

Categorical Claims	Definitional Claims	Consequential Claims	Resemblance Claims	Evaluation Claims	Proposal Claims
Is X a Y?	What is a Y?	Does X Cause Y?	Is X like Y?	Is X good or bad? Is X a good Y?	Should we do X?

Claims I Expect to Make in my Research Position Paper:

Thesis: Replace this line with a clear statement of your thesis.
(The thesis is always a type of claim, not always but sometimes a proposal.)

Categorical Claims	Definitional Claims	Consequential Claims	Resemblance Claims	Evaluation Claims	Proposal Claims
Is X a Y?	What is a Y?	Does X Cause Y?	Is X like Y?	Is X good or bad? Is X a good Y?	Should we do X?