

Understanding Claims

By Julie Gerdes

A claim is, more or less, an opinion whose truthfulness a writer is fairly sure of based on evidence. Claims are perhaps the most essential component of academic writing because they keep conversations going; without them, writing would be largely descriptive and offer no new points of view. Writing a claim is not often easy because it requires writers to be assertive and fairly confident in their positions. Ineffective arguments break down when they include unsupported or broad claims.

Let's consider an extended example of how claims work in an argument about water purification projects. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), one of every three people lacks a source of clean water globally, and the problem is getting worse. Water.org is an organization that was co-founded by American actor Matt Damon and entrepreneur Gary White in response to this problem. This group makes claims of **fact**, **value**, and **policy** that work together to support its activist goals.

Claims of Fact

A claim of **fact** is one that presents information as a truth. It uses direct language to state a condition or historical piece of information. Let's take the water initiative example from water.org. The organization's website reflects many claims of fact, including several that run with infographics down the left navigation bar of each page:

- Every 21 seconds, a child dies from a water-related illness
- Women spend 200 million hours a day collecting water
- More than 3x more people lack water than live in the United States
- The majority of illness is caused by fecal matter
- More people have a mobile than a toilet
- Lack of community involvement causes 50% of other projects to fail

(*water.org*)

CHILDREN



Every 21 seconds, a child dies from a water-related illness

WOMEN



Women spend 200 million hours a day collecting water

WATER



More than 3x more people lack water than live in the United States

DISEASE



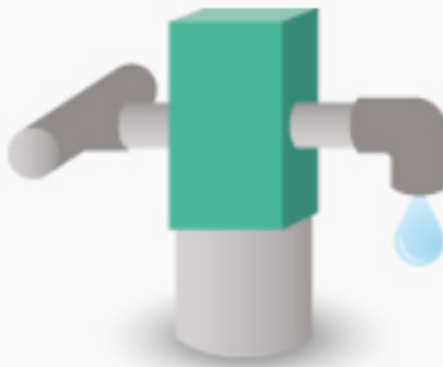
The majority of illness is caused by fecal matter

SANITATION



More people have a mobile than a toilet

ECONOMIC



Lack of community involvement causes 50% of other projects to fail

Source: water.org

Fact claims are generally written by experts and acted upon by readers who believe in the writer's credibility (ethos) or the information's logic (logos). As a rule of thumb, claims of fact should be able to be supported by original research. In the water.org example, can you think of ways in which a reader could, with the necessary research tools, investigate these figures and determine whether they are true?

Remember that all claims can be refuted. Claims of fact rely on agreed-upon definitions, which is something writers must consider. I might ask how water.org knows that women spend exactly 200 million hours a day collecting water, and I might attempt to refute the claim by countering that they are including or excluding young girls in that estimate. In other words, I might question the definition of "women." Similarly, I might question the definition of "collecting water," which can be done efficiently and methodically or as a social event that takes up time in a positive way, allowing for women to interact and even make professional connections through the chore. Furthermore, some women in very dry countries must make overnight trips with canoes to fill up with water. Are researchers including sleep and cooking time for those trips? Does this claim about sanitation define toilets as working flush toilets or does it include traditional latrines, which are often referred to verbally as "toilets" despite their lack of reliance on modern plumbing? The writers might be able to answer these questions, but it's important to realize that the infographic itself doesn't. Instead, the writers rely on the reader's trust, which they use ethos to develop through celebrity endorsements and attractive web design.

Claims of Value

A claim of **value**, as it sounds, is one that asserts moral or social value. These claims involve judgment and evaluation. Few topics are evaluated in the exact same way by all people involved. Therefore, claims of value are generally more controversial than claims of fact. While some claims of value can be dangerous because they can immediately turn off a reader who doesn't share those values, they are important to include in an argument about a controversial topic because they show a writer's awareness of her own biases. In fact, claims of value are inevitable for some arguments because they try to persuade readers to adopt a position about a subject for which no objective facts exist.

While claims of fact are generally descriptive, claims of value are *normative*; that is, they can usually be constructed using the auxiliary verb *should* or a phrase like "it is unethical to..." or "it is good/better/bad/worse to..." These value claims can fall flat because they ultimately assume that there is a universal moral code, although philosophers have spent centuries debating the very existence of such a code. For instance, if a writer is convinced that "murderers should be sentenced to death row," on the basis that murder, no matter the circumstances, is morally wrong, then there is not much more to the argument. A reader will either agree to the same set of morals or he won't because the claim relies on purely subjective moral ideas and leaves no space for compromise.

However, claims of value do not have to draw binaries. In fact, they can enrich an argument. By using supportive evidence to back a normative claim, a writer may convince the reader to adjust her own set of values or to at least question the cultural and moral principles that guide her convictions. Personal and cultural values lend themselves to flexibility. While the premises of fact claims are generally rigid (research either convinces a reader or it doesn't), the basis for value claims is malleable. A successfully supported claim of value might lead the reader to say, "I'd never thought of it that way" and reconsider the grounds on which she makes decisions. Therefore, it's important that writers are self-reflexive, use appropriate language and refrain from aggressive value claims.

Claims of Policy

Claims of **policy** can be considered the final step of an argument about a practical issue because they rely on claims of fact that opposing sides have agreed upon and claims of value that allow for a common ground. Claims of policy often arise organically, out of a need for practical and pragmatic solutions to an issue.

Once an argument has advanced to the stage of policy decisions, it gets complicated because the policies are sometimes hypothetical. Let's return to the water.org example. There are many people involved in this campaign, from environmental engineers to the media to the global citizens that the organization purports to support. If we consider the website as a composition, and the left navigation bar as a list of claims of fact, then we might consider the points listed under the tab labeled "solutions" as claims of policy. The organization's policy reflects a move past describing the issue and why it's important and towards a practical approach to solving that problem. While values are embedded in their solutions, the claims the group makes on this page argue that using a multifaceted approach that involves local community members, technology, education, and evaluation is *the best* solution to global water problems. To convince the reader, the organization then details each part of the solution with evidence of how it is logical and successful. In this discussion, there is a mix of value and fact claims.

SOLUTIONS



While drilling a well can be easy, delivering water and sanitation solutions that are sustainable in the long haul is not and involves a number of important components. Read below to learn about our program philosophy, which has been refined based on field experience gained over the past twenty years.

- [Local Partners](#)
- [Community Ownership](#)
- [Appropriate Technology](#)
- [Addressing Sanitation and Hygiene](#)
- [Measuring and Monitoring Success](#)
- [The WaterCredit Initiative](#)

Effective writers begin generating ideas about possible solutions during the brainstorming process, particularly if they are arguing about a controversial topic. An argumentative paper that just tries to convince others to believe in a set of values might not need claims of policy. However, common writing projects often have a more pragmatic agenda—to solicit change. Once a writer has convinced readers to agree with his or her set of facts and values, he or she can call readers to act in accordance to those understandings. For unique topics or ones that are just emerging, it can be difficult to guide readers to action because there might not be a way of knowing whether a solution will work. In these cases, writer use their expertise argue why a proposed solution is better than what is currently being done or why it is the best place to start in developing a long-range solution.

Putting It Together

Sometimes, a thesis in a solution-driven argumentative paper will combine these different types of claims then use the length of the paper to expand on just one. For instance, a thesis statement might be structured:

“Because children are dying of water-borne illnesses in Angola (claim of fact), and the American government should care about less fortunate global citizens (claim of value), the Department of State needs to form a panel of experts that includes environmental engineers, politicians, and African studies scholars to meet biannually in Angola (claim of policy).”

This thesis sets up a paper that will focus on at least one of these claims; deciding which one relies on awareness of audience and purpose. If this writer is preparing a paper or speech for an environmental group that works in southern Africa, then he or she will probably be able to take the claims of fact and value for granted because the audience will already be convinced of them. But perhaps the audience doesn’t understand the implications of bringing African studies or cultural scholars into the conversation. Maybe they have gotten used to the status quo of meeting independently to make decisions. In that case, explaining what it would look like to organize a larger scale meeting and the basis for the opinion that these meetings are the next best step in developing a long-term solution gives the paper a pragmatic purpose.

Works Cited

Water. World Health Organization, March 2009. Web. 1 June 2013.

Water.org. Water.org, 2013. Web. 1 June 2013.