

# Making and Supporting Claims

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You've picked a topic, done your research, identified some helpful sources, and generated a working thesis. So what now? Do you just plunge into writing your paper, assuming that the right words will come to you in the right order? You could try it; some writers are blessed with the ability to write as they think. But for most of us, a little preliminary planning can make the difference between a passable essay and one that sparkles with life. In fact, some writing instructors will ask you to turn in an organizing draft before you write a full draft of your paper. This might be as simple as an outline or flowchart detailing the basic premises and general organization of your argument. But even if your instructor doesn't ask you to do this, it's a good idea to spend some time organizing your thoughts before you set out to write your first draft. If you follow the steps listed below, you might just save yourself a lot of time in the long run.

## Know Your Purpose

In [Understanding Claims](#), you learned that all claims can be divided into three categories: claims of fact, claims of value, and claims of policy, and that each type of claim functions differently from the others. Because each claim tries to argue the truth of a different kind of statement—that is, each type of claim has a different purpose—the nature of your claim affects the choices you will need to make as you draft your paper. For example, if I want to convince my readers that global warming will cause sea levels to rise in the next 50 years (a claim of fact), I will need to ask and answer a certain series of questions. If I want to persuade them that we as citizens owe it to the next generation of citizens to do everything in our power to halt global warming (a claim of value), I will need to ask an entirely different set of questions. And if I want to argue that the United States needs to develop alternative energy sources to combat the effects of global warming (a claim of policy), a third series of questions becomes necessary. If you don't know which type of claim your paper is making, you won't know which questions to ask or how to answer them to your reader's satisfaction.

Often, the choice of which type of claim your paper will make will be decided for you. For example, your instructor may ask you to write a paper that argues for or against a certain law (a claim of policy). Or she may ask you to write an essay that defends your preference for one film over another (a claim of value). In many cases, you will have the freedom to choose for yourself. Either way, keep the nature of your claim in mind as you flesh out your argument.

## Question Your Assumptions

In order to meaningfully communicate with other human beings, you have to assume quite a lot. At the most basic level of discourse, face-to-face conversation, you take it for granted that your conversation partner knows the meaning of the words you use. For more complex communication, you often assume other things: that your audience shares certain historical knowledge with you (what the phrase "9/11" means, for example), or that you have certain ethical values in common (that it is wrong to enslave other human beings). You can see that without resorting to assumptions at least occasionally, conversations would take a lot of time. Assumptions are, by their very nature, rhetorical shortcuts.

The problem is, assumptions can often backfire. For example, let's say you're trying to convince an acquaintance how amazing the latest blockbuster action film was. You describe the explosions and chase

scenes in lovingly graphic detail; you talk about how believable the computer-animated aliens were; you hint at an intense, climactic standoff without giving away too many spoilers. But this whole time, you've been assuming that your acquaintance likes action films. If he doesn't, your argument won't even get off the ground. By the same token, in academic writing, you can't always rely on your assumptions.

To begin with, check your thesis statement for hidden assumptions that might derail your audience's ability to understand or accept your argument. Do you use any confusing key terms in your thesis statement? If so, you might need to simplify your language. At the very least, you will need to explain the confusing terms in the body of your paper. Do you assume that your audience shares your aesthetic, cultural, social, or religious values? If so, you might need to alter your argument so that it doesn't rely so strongly on those values.

You should also examine the assumptions you make in order to ensure your argument is sound. A weak thesis statement often fails because one or more of the assumptions that operate underneath it is faulty or illogical. Catching problematic assumptions before you write your first draft ultimately helps you make your argument stronger.

To see how the process of questioning your assumptions works, let's take a look at a sample thesis statement:

Solar power is the best alternative to fossil fuels because it relies on an inexhaustible source.

This thesis statement looks sound. It makes a clear, arguable claim (that solar power is the best alternative to fossil fuels) and offers a compelling reason (the sun is an inexhaustible source of energy). But let's examine the underlying assumptions that the claim implies:

1. We need to find an alternative energy source to fossil fuels
2. Solar power is a viable alternative to fossil fuels

The first statement seems like a fairly safe assumption. A large amount of research exists to support the idea that fossil fuels do not represent an infinite source of energy. Furthermore, history has shown that obtaining access to fossil fuels like oil and coal comes at a significant cost to the environment. As long as you incorporate evidence to back up this assumption in your paper, you can move on to the second assumption.

The second assumption is more problematic. Even the most cursory examination of the current literature will show that the technology to completely replace fossil fuels with solar power doesn't yet exist, and that even if it did, the overall cost to convert the power infrastructure would be unrealistically expensive. Unfortunately, this assumption is not strong enough to support your claim.

However, you don't have to scrap your thesis and start from scratch. In fact, by identifying this problematic assumption, you have given yourself the chance to make your thesis stronger. Instead of claiming that solar power is *the best* alternative to fossil fuels, you could alter the wording of the thesis to embrace a more realistic claim:

Developing better and less expensive solar power technology is an essential step towards replacing fossil fuels because, combined with other alternatives like wind and hydroelectric power, solar power ultimately represents a cheaper, safer, and more plentiful source of energy.

This claim is not only more realistic but also much more complex than the original. It acknowledges the current problems with solar power and admits that the solution to the fossil fuel problem is far from simple. But it also demonstrates the potential benefits of adopting your solution, and anticipates at least one possible objection to your original claim. By increasing the complexity of your claim, you have made your entire argument potentially stronger.

## Appeal to the Audience

In [Chapter 3: Rhetoric](#), you learned how other writers use rhetorical appeals in their arguments. At this stage of your drafting process, you get to use the same tools to shape your claim toward your audience. Each appeal uses a different set of tactics, but they work together to persuade the reader. Using logos, pathos, and ethos in concert, you decide how best to support your claim.

### Using Logos

Logical appeals demonstrate the reasoning behind your claim. They show how one idea leads to another through causality:  $x$  causes  $y$ , which then causes  $z$ . If you think that the previous statement looks like an algebraic equation, you're absolutely right. The language of pure logic is essentially mathematical. However, you don't need an advanced degree in math to use logical appeals; in fact, you use logos every day. For example, let's say you're trying to convince your parents that you need a new car. You might tell them that your old car keeps breaking down, and reason that making payments on a new car would be cheaper overall than the monthly mechanic bills you've been racking up. Congratulations; you've just used logos!

Logical appeals generally follow two patterns of reasoning, *inductive* and *deductive*. Although they often work in concert in any single argument, it's helpful to know the difference.

- With inductive reasoning, you reason from specific instances to general conclusions. (Every time you turn your key in the ignition, your car makes a brief series of clicking noises. You reason that you have a bad starter.)
- With deductive reasoning, you reason from general premises to a specific conclusion. (It's cheaper to buy a new car than to keep on fixing an old one. My car keeps breaking down. Therefore, I need a new car.)

A logical appeal is any collection of words, pictures, or ideas that tries to establish either an inductive or a deductive chain of reasoning between one state of affairs (my old car keeps breaking down) and another (my parents need to buy me a new car). There are a lot of ways to make logical appeals, but the following represent some of the most common ones:

- Clear statements that show your premises and how they lead to your conclusion
- Examples that establish historical precedents that support your idea
- Examples that use narrative to demonstrate the consequences of accepting or rejecting your idea
- Citation of reliable authorities who support your idea
- Demonstration of a cause-and-effect relationship that leads from the current situation to your idea

- Visuals (infographics, charts, photographs, schematics, etc.) that help your audience picture abstract or hard-to-process information

Let's take a look at logos in action. For your claim about solar power as a necessary alternative to fossil fuels, you might begin your argument by clearly stating your premises and how they lead to your conclusion (fossil fuel reserves will eventually run out; solar power, along with wind and water power, will never run out; therefore, we need to find a way to replace fossil fuels with these alternatives). You might then cite authorities who support your premises (Professor Y from X University has claimed that fossil fuel reserves will run dangerously short by the year 2050). You could follow this expert opinion with a discussion of what effects the lack of fossil fuels will have on the economy and quality of human life. You might then turn to demonstrating how turning to alternatives like solar and wind power can mitigate these effects, using an infographic to chart the gradual retooling of the infrastructure year by year. All of these are examples of logical appeals.

### *Using Pathos*

Pathos, the appeal to emotion, attempts to persuade the audience to accept a claim by causing an emotional response. Logos demonstrates the reasons why a claim is true; pathos makes the audience want to do something about it, to act on that knowledge, to believe in it. You use pathos when you appeal to your roommate's sense of team spirit to get her to join you at a home football game or get a friend to go to the gym with you by reminding him how good he felt after the last workout.

In academic writing, emotional appeals are most effective for claims of value and policy because the success of such claims relies on the audience's validation. Claims of fact seek merely to establish the truth of something, to generate data that can then join the pool of general human knowledge. Claims of value and policy go further; they ask the audience to participate, either through belief or action, and nothing motivates belief and action as effectively as genuinely felt emotion.

However, because of their power to motivate action, emotional appeals should be used responsibly. A fine line exists between appealing to an audience's emotions and manipulating the audience for your own purposes. Emotional appeals can express truth, but they can also distort it. When you make an emotional appeal, ask yourself if your intent is to help your audience understand the issue or to distract them from it. An ethical emotional appeal sheds light on your argument, encourages your readers to see the issue in a new and interesting way, or helps them understand how the issue affects them personally. An unethical emotional appeal clouds the argument, tries to divert the readers' attention from an unpleasant aspect of your claim, or actively misleads them.

Some of the most common ways to appeal to an audience's emotions include:

- Concrete, specific, descriptive details that paint a verbal picture for your reader; don't rely on abstract concepts
- Figures of speech, like metaphors, analogies, and similes, are powerful because they make comparisons between your topic and something else that help the reader understand what you're trying to say
- Citations from people affected by the issue (such people count as reliable authorities for the purpose of emotional appeals; after all, they've lived through what you're talking about)

- Examples that use narrative to engage the readers' emotions
- Visuals that elicit an emotional response

Let's look at pathos in action. Say you're writing a paper about the damage oil drilling does to the environment. After coming up with your logical appeals, you might decide that you need to help the reader imagine what an oil spill looks and feels like, and why it might matter to her. You might describe dead fish floating on the water and the iridescent slick of petroleum glistening on the surface of the water. You could then use a pertinent metaphor to put that image in perspective: "An oil spill is like a shroud; it hides the dead from view so you can't see what it looks like. Underneath that slick of oil, every living thing in the water is slowly suffocating." You might quote a fisherman, whose business has been ruined by the oil spill, and include a photograph of him on his boat, looking out over the water. Each of these elements is designed to elicit an emotional response from the reader. None attempt to mislead the reader or manipulate unwarranted sympathy; instead, they help the reader understand the issue on an intimate level.

### *Using Ethos*

Ethos refers to your credibility and trustworthiness as a writer. It's helpful to think of ethos as a set of responsibilities you owe to the reader. For example, you owe it to your reader to cite only the most reliable sources on an issue; you owe it to your reader to treat those who oppose your point of view fairly and to avoid distorting their position; you owe it to your reader to distinguish between your own ideas and those of others. These obligations are part of your ethos, and they are mostly passive; that is, you don't actively use them in the same way you use logical or emotional appeals. Instead, you simply abide by them.

However, you can actively establish ethos through other means. The most common ones are listed below:

- Demonstrate knowledge. If you are writing about a topic you have experience with, you can include this information in your argument, thus establishing yourself as a reliable authority.
- Try to find common ground with the opposing side; by doing so, you establish yourself as fair-minded and open to the ideas of others.
- Include and respond to one or more counterarguments, treating the opposing side's argument with as much dignity as you do your own.
- Practice full disclosure. If you changed your mind about something while drafting your argument, admit it in your paper. If you are consciously limiting the scope of your discussion in the interest of space or clarity, make sure you clue the reader into the omission and what effect it might have on your claim. If your disclosures are honest (and they appear early in your argument), you build ethos.

Let's look at ethos in action. Say you're writing a paper on the benefits of buying organic produce from local farmers. You spent a year working on your uncle's organic farm, and you have firsthand knowledge of the process. You might describe your year on the farm with a brief narrative, and then move on to a short statement of how that year changed your own beliefs about buying and supporting organic farms. You could then admit that buying organic produce is very expensive and probably out of reach for many if not most working families. Playing off that admission, you might then spend some time talking about how federal agriculture subsidies work and suggesting that these subsidies might be effectively redistributed to reward farmers for growing organic produce. Throughout this argument, you built and maintained ethos by



balancing your desire to prove your argument with your duty to treat both your reader and those who oppose your view fairly. In so doing, you strengthened your own argument.

## In Summary

We've covered a lot of ground in this section. Hopefully, by now, you realize that much of the writing process happens long before you start typing your first draft. In fact, for many writers, this is the hardest part of that process. But if you work diligently, it's also the most rewarding, because most of the work is already done. After drafting your thesis, determining the nature of your claim, checking your assumptions, and coming up with rhetorical appeals to support your claim, you most likely have pages and pages of material from which to choose. You've seen your claim grow from a single statement to an entire argument, and hopefully gained valuable insight into your topic along the way. You're ready to write your first draft. Good luck!

## Checklist for Making and Supporting Claims

- Determine the nature of your claim (fact, value, or policy)
- Identify and evaluate the assumptions your claim implies
- Revise and refine your claim if your assumptions are weak or faulty
- Generate logical appeals
- Generate emotional appeals (if appropriate)
- Check to make sure your claim does not violate your ethos
- Generate ethical appeals
- Review your claim