

Chapter 8: Making Claims

1. The kind of problem you pose determines the kind of claim you make and the kind of argument you need to support it. As we saw in chapter 4, academic researchers usually pose not practical problems but conceptual ones, the kind whose solution asks readers not to act but to understand
2. You must be clear about the kind of argument you are making, because conceptual and practical claims require different kinds of arguments. If you pose a practical problem, readers will think that your claim is relevant to its solution only when they see you support two claims: one that explains what causes the problem and another that explains how doing what you propose will fix it
3. Vague claims lead to vague arguments. The more specific your claim, the more it helps you plan your argument and keep your readers on track as they read it. You make a claim more specific through specific language and logic.
4. We do not recommend long, wordy claims for their own sake. But you benefit when you include in early versions of your claim more terms than you might ultimately use.
5. Again, we don't suggest that your final draft should offer a claim as bloated as these. But the richer your working claim, the more complex your argument is likely to be.
6. Readers value research more highly when it not only offers new data but uses them to settle what seems puzzling, inconsistent, or otherwise problematical
7. But readers value most highly new facts when they upset what seemed long settled: It has long been an article of faith in modern physics that the speed of light is constant everywhere at all times, under all conditions, but new data suggest it might not be. A claim like that will be contested by legions of physicists, because if it is true, they will have to change their minds about lots of things other than the speed of light.
8. If the reverse of a claim seems obviously false (like the first one) or trivial (like the second), then readers are likely to think the original claim is not worth an argument. (Of course, some great thinkers have successfully contradicted apparently self-evident claims, as Copernicus did when he asserted foolishly—or so it seemed at the time—that the sun does not go around the earth.)
9. Careful writers qualify their certainty with words and phrases called hedges. For example, if anyone was entitled to be assertive, it was Crick and Watson, the discoverers of the helical structure of DNA. But when they announced their discovery, they hedged the certainty of their claims: wish to suggest a , In our opinion, We believe, appear
10. But in most fields, readers distrust flatfooted certainty expressed in words like all, no one, every, always, never, and so on. Some teachers say they object to all hedging, but what most of them really reject are hedges that qualify every trivial claim.