Handout: Types of Claims

Any of the claims described in this handout can be used to develop your primary claim (your thesis), but may also be used to develop your sub-claims (sub-topics/main ideas). The most important question to keep in mind as you develop your thesis and sub-claims is, "Is it possible that a significant number of reasonable people could disagree with this thesis or with these sub-claims?" When writing an academic research essay, there is a basic expectation that you contribute something to the discussion of this topic, no matter how small, and that there is room for disagreement.

As we discussed when you began the note-taking process, the act of researching and writing this essay has forced you to enter an existing academic discussion on your topic. You are essentially discussing your topic with the authors of your sources, and you are also involving the authors of your sources in a discussion with each other. Find a place where you can insert your own voice, your own approach, your way of seeing this topic. Find the places among the discussions that have emerged between you and your sources where there is even the smallest room for debate. There is where you will find your thesis. See if the following approaches to making a claim will help you and revise your working thesis and sub-claims accordingly.

1. Claims of fact: Did it happen? Is it true? Does it exist?

Claims of fact appear to be statements of fact, but remember that your claim needs to be argumentative, so you want to make a claim about which not everyone would agree. Some claims of fact are not arguable (e.g. *The earth orbits the sun*). Consider what it is that makes the following claims arguable:

Examples:

- NASA and the US government have spent more than 30 billion dollars to fake the Apollo moon landings and to perpetuate this hoax. (A claim of fact made by Bill Kaysing in his self-published *We Never Went to the Moon: America's Thirty Billion Dollar Swindle*)
- A digital divide (inequitable access to technology) between students from wealthier school districts and students from poorer ones has added to the problem of educational success among students from the lower socioeconomic classes and students from ethnic minorities.

Categorical Arguments: is X a Y?—where you and your audience agree on the meaning of Y

- **Example:** Frying or baking starchy foods can create high levels of a potentially cancer-causing chemical called acrylamide, so those French fries that you had at lunch today (X) may be carcinogenic (Y).
- **Explanation:** When you make a categorical claim, it's important that the majority of your audience agrees on the meaning of the category. In the example above, the meaning of the category (Y) should be easily agreed upon by most; a carcinogen is something that causes cancer. Whether or not a specific item (starchy foods; X) belongs in that category, however, is open for debate.

2. Claims of definition: What is it? (Is X a Y?, where the meaning of Y is contested)

Unlike a categorical claim, in a true claim of definition, the arguer can assume that the audience agrees on the meaning of a term (X) that is being placed into a certain category (Y), but it is the definition of the category (Y) that is controversial or arguable.

- **Example:** Zygotes and embryos are human beings.
- **Explanation:** The definition of a zygote (a diploid cell resulting from the fusion of two haploid gametes; a fertilized ovum) has been vastly agreed upon by members of the community of biological scientists. Unless you're a biological scientist, making claims of definition about the meaning of the terms *zygote* or *embryo* are not good choices for argumentative topics.

The definition that is being called into question in the example above is the meaning (definition) of the term "human being" or the meaning of the concept of "life." Rather than requiring the author to make a scientific judgment, defining the meaning of the term *human* or the concept of *life* is more of a moral or philosophical question—one that is much better suited to a college-freshman-level composition assignment. *(Please note: this example came from an argument about embryonic stem-cell research rather than the overly common topic of abortion about which so many college freshmen are fond of writing and so many college writing teachers are tired of reading.)*

3. Claims of cause: What caused it?

Is there a disagreement about a cause related to your issue? Claims of cause seek to argue a cause and effect relationship. Again, remember that your claim needs to be arguable. Making a claim that cigarette smoking often leads to lung cancer is a causal claim, but not really an arguable one by today's standards. Consider the following examples of causal claims that are still (at least somewhat) debated.

- **Example:** The widespread prescription of antidepressants is directly responsible for an increase in teen suicide rates.
- **Example:** The popularity of Barbie among grade-school-aged girls has contributed to the unrealistic standards for beauty and thinness among teen girls and young women.

4. Claims of resemblance (aka argument by analogy): How is it like something else?

Compare your topic to something that you believe your audience will relate to easily as a way for your audience to better understand your argument. It's often a successful strategy to argue that a truth about something that so closely resembles your topic must also be true for your topic. Resemblance arguments are most often developed as a sub-claim that supports the overall claim or thesis of an argument. At times, however, one might choose to develop a resemblance claim as the primary claim or thesis of an argument.

- **Example:** As one admires the complex purpose, parts, and motion of a wristwatch, knowing that it is the watchmaker who is responsible for its design, so too we should, when admiring the vastly more complex purpose, parts, and motion of the universe, understand that it too has an intelligent maker. (a paraphrase of William Paley's argument for intelligent design, 1802)

5. Claims of value (or evaluative arguments): Is it good or bad?

Making a claim of value requires that you evaluate your topic or an aspect of your topic. Is it good or bad? valuable or not valuable? desirable or undesirable? and, of course, why?

- **Example:** Global warming is the most pressing challenge facing the world today.
- **Example:** The right to bear arms in the US is an important one.
- **Example:** Physician assisted suicide is immoral.

6. Claims of policy: What should we do about it?

Claims of policy suggest a solution to a problem that has been defined or described by an argument.

- **Example:** Increased tax dollars for education of prisoners will result in a decrease in the number of released prisoners who re-offend.
- **Example:** The sale of assault weapons should be banned in the U.S.