4.2: Defining a Claim

The foundation for all argument is the **Claim**. A Claim is any single statement of controversy advanced for the purpose of argument. Both sides of an argument, the pro-side and the con-side in a debate, should argue the same Claim. The Claim is a statement much like the topic of an argument, but it does much more.

Claims represent both the starting point and the ending point of an argument. That is, a Claim is advanced by an advocate to promote an argument. It is that same claim that will end up being accepted or rejected at the end of the argument. A Claim is the main point, the thesis, and the controlling idea. You can find the Claim by asking the question, “What is the advocate trying to prove?”

There is a difference between an argument and a discussion.

- The focus of a discussion is a question
- The focus of an argument is a statement.

Using a question, a discussion looks at a variety of topics, viewpoints, and ideas to come to a conclusion and answer the question. There are many sides and points of view that are brought into a discussion. All the participants can offer a different view or opinion. As an example you might have a discussion on, “What is the best movie of all time?” “Where should we go for dinner?” or “What should we do about the war in the Middle East?”

An argument looks at a single topic or subject to decide if it should be accepted or rejected. There are only two sides to an argument. You are either for the topic, or as we will see, the Claim of the argument, or against the topic of the argument. All participants will argue for one side or the other. There is no middle ground.

- The pro-side will argue for the claim and thus a change in what is currently happening
- The con-side will speak against the claim and support the current, existing situation referred to as the “status quo.”
The focus of an argument then is a statement. As an example, you might argue, “The Godfather is the greatest movie of all time.” The pro-side will argue for the acceptance of the Claim, while the con side will argue against the Claim in an attempt to have it rejected.

Claims represent the topic of an argument. You cannot have a constructive conflict without a Claim. In order to avoid destructive conflict, like bickering or quarreling, the Claim must be properly phrased and understood by all participants involved in the argument. There are seven key characteristics of Claims.