4.3: Characteristics of a Claim

Claims are phrased as statements and not questions. The goal of a claim is to promote a pro versus con debate-style environment. Claims often emerge as a result of a discussion, where many points of view are presented. But in the debate the claim is a statement.

Claims are phrased against the status quo in order to create the potential for controversy. Status quo refers to current beliefs, policies, rules, behaviors, or institutions. Status quo can be three things: an individual's stasis, where they are most comfortable; some institution's current beliefs, values or policies; or the starting point for an argument.

A properly phrased claim is one which challenges the status quo. There is usually very little controversy in advocating a claim that promotes or reinforces that which already exists. If a child wants her curfew changed, it wouldn’t make for much controversy if she went to her parent and said, "My curfew should be left at midnight." The parent would nod in approval and there would be no debate. Now, if she went to her parent and said, "My curfew should be 3 a.m. instead of midnight," her parent would most likely take exception and respond as that is now an argument against what currently exists.

If the current status quo cannot be clearly defined, the advocate is free to phrase the claim as he or she would like, with the claim becoming the starting point for the argument. For example, I want to advocate a claim with regard to the government making more funds available for Zika research, but I’m unsure as to whether they are currently doing this, I would phrase the claim so that it represents the starting point for the debate. I make the claim that, “The United States should provide additional funding for Zika research.” Now I have covered myself in case they have made money available by using the words “additional funding.”

Claims should be phrased in an unbiased manner so that both sides have an equal opportunity to advocate, support, and defend their positions. There is an obvious difference between debating the claim, “The United States should fight International terrorism,” and the claim, “The freedom-loving, democratic, human-rights supporting
government of the United States should fight satanic international terrorism." The focus in the first one is clear, and allows both sides to present their positions and defend their stands. The focus in the second claim is unclear. What are we debating? Are we debating whether the United States is a “freedom-loving, democratic, human-rights supporting government?” Are we debating whether “terrorism is satanic?” Keep your emotions out of the claim. Make the claim as objective as possible. You can always use your emotions in your actual argument.

If you are trying to open up a dialogue to engage in constructive debate on a topic, an unbiased claim, free from loaded, ambiguous and high intensity language is essential. If you want to just promote your point of view, you can be as biased as you want in putting the claim together. The language of the claim should be consistent with the goal of the arguer.

Properly phrased claims should be as specific as possible. The best claims are those that indicate, to the degree necessary, who, what, when, and where. The more specific the wording of the claim, the more focused any disagreement becomes. By being as specific as you can in wording the claim, you can limit the scope of the argumentation for both the pro and the con. What about the why? You do not need to include why, because you will explain why when you develop your specific arguments to support your stand on the claim.

Effective claims promote a pro/con argumentative environment. Unlike a discussion where many different opinions and views can be expressed, a debate on a claim offers only two points of view: the pro-side, which is the side promoting acceptance of the claim; and the con-side, which is the side contrary to claim acceptance. These are the only two positions that can be argued in either a formal or informal argument. Compromise is generally not an alternative in a debate. In a debate, the choices are either to accept or reject the claim being argued. After the debate a discussion could begin that would lead to the development of a compromise, which would be a new claim.

The claim should be phrased so that the burdens (obligations and responsibilities of each arguer) are clear to both sides involved in the debate. The major obligations are the burden of proof which belongs to the pro-side, burden of presumption which belongs to the con-side, and two burdens which are shared by both the pro and the con, the burden of rebuttal, and the obligation to present a prima facie case, also known as a reasonable argument. Thus, each side in an academic argument has three burdens to fulfill. More on this later in the chapter.

Both sides debate the same claim. The dispute concerns whether the claim advanced for adherence should be accepted (the pro-side), or whether the claim should be rejected (the con-side). The side opposing the claim does not create a new one to counter the claim presented by the pro-side, because this would set up an argument with two competing pro sides, each with a burden of proof. There would be no status quo to defend. In order for the process of argumentation to take place, there would then have to be two con-sides. To avoid this, both sides argue the exact same claim. The pro-side argues in favor of accepting the claim, while the con-side argues that the claim should be rejected. If the debate claim was, “Capital punishment should be banned” the pro-side would state, “I will be arguing for the claim that, ‘Capital punishment should be banned,’” while the con side would state, “I will be arguing against the claim that ‘Capital punishment should be banned.’” In both cases, the claim stays the same. This clarifies the burdens that each person has in the debate.

Arguing about two or more claims at the same time creates confusion and makes reaching some resolution on the claim difficult. For example, if two people are arguing about the topic of abortion, and one is arguing that, “Abortion should be banned,” the person opposed to the claim debates this claim by taking the con position and arguing for its rejection. The con side to the claim does not create their own counter-claim such as, “A woman has the right to control her own body.”
Instead this statement might be used as a reason to reject the claim.

Debating one claim at a time also prevents what is called “kitchen sink” fighting where everything can be thrown into the argument. We should “argue” over one claim at a time. In that way, we maintain a clear argumentative focus.