

Yale Department of English



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English 114 Guide
created by Felisa Baynes-Ross

Key Elements of an Academic Argument

A central goal of English 114 is to teach you how to analyze arguments. In this endeavor, we are interested not only in what texts mean, but also in *how* texts make meaning. Whether you are examining sound, image, or a written essay, you will be prompted to think about what that text *does*. You will consider a writer's choices and how those choices affect the text's meaning. To do this well, you need to have in your grasp some key terms to help you identify the specific moves that writers make. This guide defines the key elements of an argument: **problem**, **claim**, **evidence**, **warrant**, and **motive**. The examples provided alongside each definition will help you close read arguments and allow you to be strategic about the choices you make in your own writing.

01 Problem

04 Claim

06 Evidence

07 Warrant

09 Motive

These terms have been adapted from Wayne C. Booth, et al. *The Craft of Research*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016.

Problem

*Think of problem as a **moment of tension** within a text or conversation. Problems generate **questions** you can explore in your own thinking and writing.*

Although your first impulse might be to find something that is wrong with the argument, think of *problem* as a **moment of productive tension** within a given text or conversation. This means that instead of looking for how the argument fails, you seek to identify the *specific logical and rhetorical choices* in the text and *how* those choices affect your *understanding* of the argument. Always remember that before you can critique the writer's argument, you first need to understand what the writer is up to.

Reading carefully and closely, you might discover that the writer prioritizes specific kinds of evidence to support their ideas, makes a key concept ambiguous, or leaves out a certain aspect of the conversation. These **gaps** or **ambiguities** are problems for you to explore. What does the writer's choice of evidence allow them to emphasize?

How does the writer's process of defining a key concept shape your understanding of their subject? How does a gap in the essay affect the argument's focus? Notice that the emphasis is on *how* the writer makes the argument.

Whether you are analyzing a single text or comparing the perspectives of multiple writers, finding a moment of tension can become your entry into that conversation. The tension or problem is usually a small finding that might shift readers' perception of the conversation in some way.

Bear in mind that the problems or tensions you will examine in your readings are usually conceptual ones. They have to do with ideas, though they may have practical implications or consequences.



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The Trouble with *Problem*

Identifying a problem or moment of tension within an argument is one of the hardest things you will learn to do in English 114. The use of the word problem is itself counterintuitive. We typically think of problems as things that are wrong whether they present in a text or in our lives. We don't want problems!

But, in academic writing, we **need** problems. As Booth et al. says, "a problem is something we seek out" (54). Problems keep conversations going. Finding a moment of tension allows you to **ask new questions** of the text and to think more deeply about the writer's argument and its implications. Problems fuel intellectual inquiry and research.

Take a moment to re-examine a text you have been assigned for your class. That writer is also responding to a problem they have identified either within a single text or a broader conversation. Pay special attention to their introduction. Can you tell what questions or tensions drive the argument?

Example of a *Problem*

"National liberation, national reawakening, restoration of the nation to the people or Commonwealth, whatever the name used, whatever the latest expression, decolonization is always a violent event. At whatever level we study it—individual encounters, a change of a name for a sports club, the guest list at a cocktail party, members of a police force or the board of directors at a state or private bank—decolonization is quite simply the substitution of one 'species' of mankind by another. The substitution is unconditional, absolute, total, seamless." Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 1.

You might approach this excerpt by paying attention to the **keyterms** or repeated concepts significant to the claims in the passage. You will notice the repetition of the term *decolonization*. How is this concept defined? What do you notice about the examples that Fanon provides to illustrate his claim that "decolonization is always a violent event?" How are the examples in tension with the idea of violence? What is the effect of associating a seemingly benign action like the renaming of a sports club with violence? How can violence contribute to the "restoration of the nation?" Why does Fanon speak in absolute terms? What are the ethical implications of decolonization as Fanon presents it? Whose ethics? Pay attention to how contradictions, ambiguities, and tensions elicit the questions above.



Claim

The claim is the writer's **position on a given topic**, the central idea they are defending. Think of the claim as the **answer** to the question or the resolution to the problem that drives the essay. An essay will have a major claim and multiple sub-claims or related points that help the writer demonstrate their argument.

Claims are *contestable*, meaning they can be challenged. A compelling argument carefully considers alternative views or *counter-arguments* on a topic. By considering perspectives that challenge their own, a writer develops a nuanced view on their subject.

Claims can be practical or conceptual or both. A practical claim is a statement about what you want your reader to do and a conceptual claim aims to influence the reader's thinking.

When you develop a claim, strive for statements that are clear and specific. The best claims provide readers with a sense of the rich and important concepts you will address in your essay. Your claim must be *arguable*, meaning it can be supported with good evidence. Do not avoid complications to your claim because you are afraid of undermining your own argument. Instead, think of that complication as an opportunity to move towards a richer, more complex idea. Treat *counter-arguments* as opportunities to refine and complicate your own thinking.



Example of a *Claim*

"[M]ost people don't simply choose to place themselves at risk of HIV transmission: **rather, they are forced into prostitution due to poverty, inequality, and lack of employment options. Contrary to the [President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief] PEPFAR and traditional HIV/AIDS policy perspective, these collective issues—and not the immoral decisions of individuals—result in the extensive sex trade that drives HIV transmission.**"

Akielly Hu, "The Limits of Moral Ideology in Foreign HIV/AIDS Prevention," 2-3.



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In this example, you will notice that the claim (in bold) directly responds to a problem within policies or approaches to HIV/AIDS prevention in developing countries. The writer identifies a **problem** within the written policy: **"No PEPFAR funds...may be used to provide assistance to any group or organization that does not have a policy explicitly opposing prostitution"** (qtd. in Hu 2). In its focus on morality, the policy **ignores** the socioeconomic factors that determine women's choices. In her attention to the multiple factors that influence the sex trade, Hu complicates our understanding of the subject.

Evidence

In any argument, the writer needs good evidence and reasons to support their claims. *Reasons* tell the reader *why* you are making a specific claim, but you still need evidence to **substantiate** those reasons. Evidence includes the concrete details, examples, facts, personal experience, statistical reports, or specific scenes in a film or key passages in a text that writers mobilize to **demonstrate** the argument. Evidence signals to readers that an argument is valid and that the writers' ideas can be trusted.

In your essays, you do not merely want to list a series of facts or quotations in your paragraphs. You will want to *analyze* the evidence you have selected. Your analyses become the basis upon which to build your argument. This means that you *explain* how the details you have selected bear out the argument you are making. Good analysis requires that you *link* the evidence to your claim.

Keep in mind that your evidence needs to be *sufficient* to the argument. In other words, does your selection of textual quotations or examples *adequately* prove your point? As you determine what kinds of evidence to use, consider whether your selected evidence is appropriate to the *context*, *audience*, and *purpose* of your argument.

Example of Evidence

"Elizabeth Pisani, an HIV/AIDS epidemiologist working in Indonesia, reiterates this need to remove the moral judgment from sex workers in relation to HIV/AIDS. She argues that in many instances, the lucrative nature of the sex trade makes prostitution the financially best option for women: 'In the factory, you earn 19 cents an hour. In the brothel, your take home pay averages about US \$3.15 an hour. Two horrid jobs; one pays sixteen times more than the other' (Pisani 217). **This huge disparity between the wages of the limited employment opportunities (namely, factory work or prostitution) for women in impoverished communities further demonstrates that most people enter the sex trade out of economic necessity rather than their own lack of morality.**"

Hu, "The Limits of Moral Ideology in Foreign HIV/AIDS Prevention," 3.

Citing Pisani's research allows Hu to demonstrate what influences women's decisions in impoverished communities. Her attention to the experiences of these women helps her to demonstrate the claim that women enter the sex trade for economic reasons. Pay attention to how Hu explains the connection between the evidence and her claim (in bold).

Warrant

A warrant is a principle of reasoning or an assumption generally accepted as true.

A warrant is a statement that connects a *reason* to a claim. Think of a warrant as an underlying **principle, general assumption, or belief** that people accept as true and that **establishes a connection between the reason and the claim** the writer makes. These principles can be explicitly stated in the writer's argument or they may be implied.

Warrants can be specific to communities of writers and researchers or academic disciplines. These **shared beliefs or knowledge** are usually developed over long periods of time, and writers may not state them explicitly because they assume that their readers are already familiar with these principles of reasoning.

In your own writing, you will need to determine whether the warrant or principle of reasoning that supports your claim needs to be identified. Some principles are not self-evident, and you will need to be clear to your reader about how you are connecting reasons to claims. If you are not writing for expert readers in your field, the principle relies on a new understanding, or the reason is controversial, then you will need to make that reasoning explicit to help readers follow the logic of your argument.

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Example of a *Warrant*

How does one determine whether a law is just or unjust? A just law is a man-made code that squares with the moral or the law of God. An unjust law is a code that is out of harmony with the moral law." Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., "Letter from Birmingham Jail," 822.

King's claim relies on the belief that the "law of God" is a moral authority and that it is superior to human codes. Rather than treat this as a naïve understanding, what might this principle of reasoning reveal about King's audience? And how might his presentation of Scripture as a reliable authority justify his defiance of segregation laws?

As this example suggests, the warrants or principles that writers use might depend on the audience. King doesn't need to explain why the law of God is just. He expects his readers to know.

As you examine arguments, be aware that warrants or principles of reasoning can also be tension-filled. Re-read the excerpt from King's essay. Do you notice the categories that he creates? In presenting Scripture as a moral guide, what does he choose to ignore?

Return to the example of evidence from Hu's essay. What implicit assumptions support the reasons and evidence she offers in support of her claim?

Motive

The motive of your essay goes beyond your personal interest in the subject. You must also demonstrate the significance of your argument to the reader.



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A writer's motive establishes the **stakes or significance of the argument**. It indicates to the reader how addressing a problem or tension *changes* the conversation on a topic. The motive might also *justify* why the writer has chosen a specific *approach* to their subject and how that approach *contributes* to new knowledge of the subject.

Identifying the motive of an argument helps readers to appreciate why the argument matters and helps them care about the claims the writer makes.

When you consider the motive for your own argument, you might think of it as the incentive or pay-off to the reader for investing their time and energy in your work. This means that a motive goes beyond a writer's personal reasons for pursuing a question or problem. Though personal reasons or experience make the argument significant to them, writers still need to connect to their readers.

Example of *Motive*

“Cumulatively the book envisions depression as a form of being stuck, both literal and metaphorical, that requires new ways of living or, more concretely, moving. It seeks to be a form of reparative scholarly work that can help facilitate that path. It challenges medical and scientific methods as the only way to know depression and aims to craft ways of writing about depression that differ even from much scholarship in the humanities that relies on conventional forms of research. It’s unconventional archive thus includes, in addition to personal narrative, the spiritual and religious traditions of the first chapter, the indigenous traditions and everyday experiences of racism of the second, and the queer cultures that are part of my daily life. I hope to reinvigorate forms of humanities writing that are based in creative and speculative thinking and feeling.” Ann Cvetkovich, *Depression: A Public Feeling*, 26.

Cvetkovich identifies multiple motives for her project. The scope of her work differs from that of an essay. Still, pay attention to phrases that reveal what the writer hopes her book will **accomplish**. What **conceptions** of depression does her work challenge? What **impact** will her work have on writing in the humanities? Notice that in articulating the motives for her own project, the writer focuses on what the work will **do**, how it will **transform** the thinking and writing on the subject.

Examine the *Motive*

In her essay on HIV/AIDS transmission, Hu writes that “policymakers must shift to a more accurate view of the HIV pandemic as a collective, systemic issue that can be addressed through a community-based, holistic approach” (2).

What does this change in perspective allow policy makers to do?

Notice that Hu’s motive for the argument involves shifting perspectives on an important topic. That shift has important practical implications. What are they?

In a scholarly essay of your choice, try to identify the motive for the writer’s argument. Where does the writer identify the motive(s) for their argument? How well does that placement work for the argument?

Works Cited

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