



What's In A Claim?

A Framework for Helping Students Write Persuasive Claims

Ryan Lewis

With ten minutes left in class, my junior year sociology students sat quietly, full of controlled effort as they tackled the exit question on the overhead. The question was a simple supporting question that they had been working on as part of our latest inquiry. After a few minutes, I began walking the aisles, glancing over some shoulders, stopping here and there to look closely at student work. What was I looking for? Like many teachers, at this point in a lesson, I was hoping to see coherent answers to the question. However, over the last few years, I have come to look for something more specific. I was looking for a claim—a two- to three-sentence long response that would reveal what I needed to know about the depth of student learning. I stopped at the desk of one student who had finished her response. I picked her paper up, read it, and handed it back. “This is good, really good,” I said. “A few months ago, you wouldn’t have written this.” She responded, “I know. After doing this all year, it’s easy now.”

After the C3 Framework was published in 2013, I remember attending a professional development on teaching through inquiry.¹ Although I thought I knew what to expect, I was not prepared for ideas that would forever change the way I taught. From the moment I heard the phrase “compelling question,” I was hooked and I began to reorganize my courses. Bit by bit, I added focused inquiries, full inquiries, even compelling questions to assignments—all of the trappings of inquiry. I even made a “cycle of inquiry poster” and tacked it on my classroom wall.

After two years of working furiously to map out inquiry, however, I was stuck. Somewhere in the forest of questions, tasks, and sources, I felt I had missed

something. I repeated the same processes: Questions, check; tasks, check; sources, check; argument, check. Students were learning. They were reading. They were challenged. All of the things that social studies educators say they want their students to be doing, mine were doing.

Yet, increasingly, it appeared that too many students were missing the boat. It was these students that kept me up at night. Somewhere, in my mind, a step had been missed, or perhaps overlooked. It wasn’t until I began the next school year that my concerns began to coalesce around one word—claim. “Write an evidence-based claim...” That phrase pops up over and over in the C3 language and in the Inquiry Design Model (IDM) world.² As I sat one morning

grading student claims, it hit me: Do my students really know what a claim is? Do *I* really know what a claim is? These questions have dominated my thinking for the past two years. These questions ultimately led me to a conviction that crafting persuasive claims is at the heart of what we do as social studies teachers. So, how do we get our students to write them, and write them well?

It turns out that words like “claim” are hard to nail down. As teachers, we throw the word around all the time. But what do we mean when we say a claim is “good” or “strong?” Not only is the term vague, so are its descriptors. Although “claim” as a concept first caught my attention in the language of the C3, frustratingly absent were the qualities and characteristics of claims. Claims required evidence, to be sure, but what does this even mean? I wanted guidance or some kind of tool that would help me clarify the components of a claim, be consistent in my feedback to students, and would prompt conversation between students about the nature of claims.

Spurred on by these questions, I began working on a tool to coach my students around better claim writing. I started by asking the question, “How do we teach students to write better claims?” I



(Photo by Rapt Productions 2020)

Ryan Lewis teaches claim writing to a group of students at Woodford High School, Kentucky.

worked with my professors and teacher colleagues to develop what we all jokingly call The Lewis Framework, in which I outline four characteristics of a persuasive claim. In this article, I start by reviewing the literature that guided the framework's development and then I walk through the current iteration of the *Framework for Making Persuasive Claims*. From there, I describe student examples and how the framework is being used in my classroom to coach students in the writing process.

Searching for Answers

Traditionally, claim making falls within the larger discourse of argumentation. In fact, VanSledright has argued that argumentation is what sets social studies apart from other forms of learning due to the specific demands of source work and evidence gathering.³ Yet, argumentation instruction is consistently left out of the classroom in favor of more “traditional” instruction of textbook memorization and the presentation of simplified narratives devoid of discussion or critique.⁴

With so much already written on argumentation, why spend so much time thinking about claims? It turns out that making claims, both as a *product* and as a *process*, is integral to teaching

argumentation.⁵ As Monte-Sano notes, the possibility of learning is predicated on students' ability to understand arguments, which includes “the questioning and analysis of sources; the consideration of causation, change, perspective, or significance; [and] the construction of claims through corroboration of evidence.”⁶ Claim making, then, is a key part of the argumentation process, requiring teachers to be able to both articulate and to teach the process of constructing claims.

Teachers understand the challenges of teaching argumentation. It requires time, resources, and opportunities for students to participate in the process “as questions are framed, data gathered, and claims formed. Learning to produce a well-written, evidence-based argument is challenging work.”⁷ However, just as inquiry requires instructional shifts, so does teaching the process of argumentation, adding to the need for teachers to develop “specific instructional practices [to] support this shift.”⁸

The C3 Framework and IDM have emphasized the centrality of argumentation through implementation of compelling questions and the explicit processing of sources through formative tasks.⁹ What are currently needed are more instruc-

tional tools to assist teachers and students in doing inquiry. The *Persuasive Claim* framework links together a theoretical emphasis on argumentation and the daily act of working with students to become better writers and thinkers.

Introducing a Framework for Writing Persuasive Claims

According to Monte-Sano “claims are an end-product of discussion developed through honest consideration of sources.”¹⁰ The *Persuasive Claim* framework attempts to elaborate on this definition, parsing it down in order to better understand it. For our purposes here, I define a *persuasive claim* as an assertion that is supported with factual information and evidence from sources. A claim is often written in one or two sentences as it is meant to state a conclusion rather than be explanatory or expository. Claims can be a response to a question or they can be deduced by examining source(s). In either case, the key is that the claim is supported by the evidence that a student has interpreted and excerpted from sources, regardless of the conflicting nature and/or complexity of the source(s).

In order to better understand the nature of a claim, my colleagues and

I settled on four important and integral dimensions of a persuasive claim. A persuasive claim is evidentiary, it is clear, it is accurate, and it is reasoned. In expanded form, these dimensions are explained as follows:

- **Evidentiary:** An *evidentiary* claim should be a convincing statement, supported by corroborating evidence from multiple sources, that accounts for evidentiary discrepancies or conflicting perspectives.
- **Reasoned:** A *reasoned* evidentiary claim should be logical and valid within the context of the question or task. Such a claim demonstrates students’ thoughtful interpretation of sources in relationship to a question or task.
- **Clear:** A *clear* evidentiary claim should use unambiguous language to effectively communicate conclusions. Clarity enables the claim to speak to a wide audience who may not have examined the same sources as the author.
- **Accurate:** An *accurate* evidentiary claim presents

factual information that is verifiable, is accepted as true, and reflects a plausible interpretation of a source(s). Such a claim is relevant to the question at hand and reflects a clear understanding of the relevant ideas and events.

Why these dimensions? These four dimensions add focus to what is often a messy process. This focus also creates increased clarity for teachers and students and streamlines feedback, assessment, and common language around claim making and argumentation.

Conceptualized in a more streamlined way, it is helpful to see these dimensions in rubric form. The same indicators are organized below in a single-point rubric.¹¹ This rubric was created by a C3 teacher and his students as a way to assess student argumentation during the summative task of an inquiry. Here it is repurposed, allowing students to clearly see the expectations for a persuasive claim. Each side of the rubric allows for teacher feedback to show areas of student progress (Enhancers) and also areas in which students need to grow (Distractors). As we will see in the coming sections, having these clear expectations makes teacher feedback simple and concise.

The framework, like the rubric, is designed to be flexible in order to accom-

modate student needs and to provide structure and language that both guides students and assesses their learning. The four dimensions are likewise meant to pull double-duty—describing what is expected of students and helping teachers pinpoint what is going on in the students’ writing.

Beta-Testing the Persuasive Claim Framework

But what does all of this look like in real time? Let’s consider the following example. Some of my colleagues and I used a tenth-grade IDM inquiry on the French Revolution to beta-test the framework and its four dimensions. Focusing on the supporting question “Did Napoleon’s rise to power represent a continuation of or an end to revolutionary ideals?” we drafted the following evidentiary claim:

Even though Napoleon’s rise to power brought about order and an attempt at reform through his Code Napoleon, his reign was not a continuation of the Revolution due to his consolidation of power as Emperor and the suppression of critics and the press in France.

Not bad, we thought. But we decided to use the framework to drill down on what is really going on here:

Enhancers	Criteria/Dimension	Distractors
(Areas that show progress)	<p>Evidentiary Claim is convincing. Author weighs evidence by corroborating multiple sources in order to support the claim.</p> <p>Reasoned Claim is logical and valid. It answers all parts of the question or task and conclusions follow a logical chain of reasoning.</p> <p>Clear Claim communicates conclusions effectively by using unambiguous language. Claim can be understood by a wide audience and avoids vague language.</p> <p>Accurate Information presented in the claim is factual and verifiable. Claim represents plausible interpretation of evidence.</p>	(Areas that need improvement)

Evidentiary: This claim is “evidentiary” because it weighs evidence. Napoleon was a “child” of the Enlightenment and believed in many liberal reforms. This point was taken into consideration, but it was weighed against Napoleon’s actions as Emperor. The claim was informed by multiple sources of information.

Accurate: This claim is “accurate” in that all of the actions mentioned in the claim are accepted as true and are both verifiable by and reasonably inferred from primary and secondary sources. The Code Napoleon was an actual law enforced in France that many historians recognize as important and significant. Napoleon did crown himself Emperor. There are several letters written by Napoleon discussing his political ideals showing that he was influenced by Enlightenment thought.

Reasoned: The claim is “reasoned” in that it answers and considers all parts of the question. The claim shows an attempt to arrive at a conclusion that is supported by the evidence. The claim is valid as it follows an historical attempt at comparing one series of events to another, looking for similarities or differences.

Clear: The claim is “clear” in that it uses language that is comprehensive and unambiguous. The author uses content specific vocabulary in order to add specificity, avoiding vague allusions to events or individuals.

The value of these dimensions lies not in simply articulating what makes a claim persuasive; rather it provides a

coherent and consistent set of language that actually allows students to assess their own writing.

Writing Better Claims

So far, so good, right? To be sure, let’s look at another, more likely, scenario based on the writing of some of my students. At the start of this year, I began my tenth-grade government classes with an inquiry into the potential problems with democracy. One of the supporting questions asks, “what challenges are currently facing American democracy?” What follows are four student claims. Using the *Persuasive Claim* framework above can you spot the places where the claims need help? Let’s try it out! (*Note: The grammatical errors in the claims are as the students wrote them.*)

Claim 1: “Aside from an absence of participation, caused by a lack of respect within the judicial limits and constant fighting, the United States thrives with a flawless voting system, along with free speech and judicial limits on the executive.”

The student does make an attempt to answer the question. But what does he mean by a “lack of respect with the judicial limits”? This part of the claim needs clarity. Using the framework, what suggestions would you make to this student?

Claim 2: “American democracy faces many challenges that will cause it to slowly erode. One of these challenges include that the constitution is based off of racist ideas considering it was written by people who supported slavery. This can prove to be a problem because if minorities feel undermined they won’t feel encouraged to participate in the government thinking their voice doesn’t matter. Democracy is also in danger because Americans were never adequately taught to participate as a citizen from a young age causing a lack of participation in citizens overall.”

This student clearly wants to use a wide array of evidence to support her

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– Steve Sonksen, Graduate History, MA



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conclusion. But one wonders what question this student is answering. It probably lacks reasoning which also hurts the claim's accuracy. Knowing that this student needs help in possibly two areas, what suggestions would you make?

Claim 3: "Democracy today is facing many challenges such as people have less of an understanding of what democracy is, which leads to people thinking and saying that the constitution is not needed. Although we are not in imminent danger, if these challenges worsen, the American democracy would be in great danger."

This student provides us with a clear answer. Yet, to what "challenges" is he referring? Which people think the Constitution is not needed? This claim is begging for evidence. If you were standing next to this student, what evidence would you suggest they use?

Claim 4: "American democracy is built upon the practice of democratic institutions, such as elections. However, a lack of effective institutions, combined with partisan politics, has led to decreased participation in the democratic process, thus weakening America's democracy."

Good claim! More specifically the claim defines and provides examples (Evidentiary). It is well organized as it uses a counterclaim to emphasize its conclusion, giving a nod to competing evidence (Reasoned, Evidentiary). It is easy to understand and uses language that most academics would recognize (Clear, Accurate). The claim is also verifiable, connecting "partisan politics" to a struggling democracy (Accurate).

Claims represent a summation of student content knowledge and the depth to which a student comprehends a single question or a set of information. As claims represent the foundation of argumentation, claim writing becomes fundamental to the ways in which a teacher organizes instruction and a way for students to systematically reflect on their own learning. Much as a professional basketball player continues to improve through dribbling and shooting drills,

continued experience in claim making enhances and expands students' ability to express evidence-based arguments. Monte-Sano and de la Paz emphasize the importance of these repeated opportunities for students to write, linking this practice to student success.¹² If the goal of inquiry is the pursuit and exploration of compelling questions, claim writing represents the way by which students actually grapple with the questions by weighing evidence and forming conclusions. In essence, claim making operationalizes students' level of understanding of the question and reflects the trajectory of their thinking about the compelling question. If inquiry is the road map, claim making is the vehicle. Therefore, teaching students to write better claims is worth our time.

Conclusion

The Framework for Making Persuasive Claims has shifted the way my students think, write, and talk about arguments. It has created a common language around inquiry. The terms clear, evidentiary, reasoned, and accurate now have a specific and permanent meaning for my students, simplifying my feedback and coaching.

By focusing on claim making, teachers take the first and most critical step in establishing a culture of inquiry with their students. While inquiry as a whole provides a consistent direction for scope and sequence in a curriculum, a focus on argumentation and, to a greater extent, claim making provides a skill focus for both teachers and students. This focus clarifies the question of what we are "doing" as social studies teachers. Rather than different skill sets across units, courses, or even teachers, classrooms that focus time and energy on claim making create a set of articulated student expectations, further stressing the salience of argumentation in social studies education.

Of course, claims do not represent the end goal of instruction. As someone who is still trying to "figure out" inquiry, my focus on helping students write better claims represents only one puzzle piece

in the giant picture of social studies teaching. The next questions surface from our practices as teachers: How do claims help my students identify the arguments in a source? Can writing claims help my students think more clearly about controversial topics? In what other areas can I apply this framework? These are only questions that time and hard work with our students will reveal. 🌍

Notes

1. National Council for the Social Studies, *College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards* (Silver Spring, Md., 2013).
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5. D. Walton and D.M. Godden, "Informal Logic and the Dialectical Approach to Argument," in *Reason Reclaimed*, eds. H. V. Hansen and R. C. Pinto (Newport News, Va.: Vale Press, 2007), 3–17.
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8. Ibid; Monte-Sano, "Argumentation in History Classrooms," 316.
9. Kathy Swan, John Lee, and S.G. Grant, "Questions, Tasks, Sources: Focusing on the Essence of Inquiry," *Social Education* 82, no. 3 (2018), 142–146.
10. Ibid; Monte-Sano, "Argumentation in History Classrooms," 316.
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12. C. Monte-Sano and S. De La Paz, "Using Writing Tasks to Elicit Adolescents' Historical Reasoning," *Journal of Literacy Research* 44, no. 3 (2012), 273–299.



RYAN LEWIS is in his 12th year of teaching at Woodford County High School in Versailles, Kentucky, where he is also department chair. He is currently enrolled

in the University of Kentucky's Social Studies Doctoral Cadre, focusing on argumentation and curriculum design.