

# ***DukeWrites* Enrichment Suite**

## **Main claims: Effective claims**

*With Denise Comer, Director of First-year Writing*

Hello, as you were working on Project 1, you certainly made an argument about Coyle's text. Beginning with Project 2, and throughout the subsequent writing projects in our course, we're really going to be moving you towards making more effective claims ~ original arguments of your own.

And so I want to talk today about what makes a claim more or less effective. A colleague of mine about 15 years ago who was also a teacher of writing came up with what he called at the time the 5 Cs of effective claims.

I don't know if these are actually the words that he had used with those Cs, but...I've kind of modified them over the years a little bit. Or maybe they're the same words; I'm not sure.

So, I'll take you through what they mean and then we'll look at some examples. And I'll ask you to weigh in on what you think about those examples.

So, Compelling. Is the claim relatively compelling? Is it significant? Obviously, not everything is gonna be interesting to every reader out there. But there should be at least a reasonable number of people who will find something interesting and meaningful and compelling about your argument. Certainly you should find it compelling; if you don't even find it compelling, then probably you want to search to make it a more compelling argument.

Secondly, is it connected? And connected means, in the way I'm using it, is it connected to the work of others? Have you researched what else has been written about this, what the other part of the conversation has been and how you're situating your own work within that scholarly conversation?

And is it also connected to the actual occasion for writing? If someone has asked you to write about a particular thing, then are you actually writing about that thing? And then finally, the other version of connected I'm talking about here is, is your claim, is your argument, connected to the kinds of evidence and the points that you've made throughout the whole project?

Sometimes people's claims make one assertion and then they actually end up making a different assertion throughout their writing ~ so you want to have alignment there.

Contestable is a good word but I really want to couch it carefully, because I'll tell you what I don't mean. What I don't mean is that you don't have to have a claim that other people can argue against; I'm not talking about that contestability. It's more ~ is there a certain...are there other readers or other scholars who are out there who could make some kind of reasonable caveat to your claim? Or who could take it in a different direction of some kind? So is it a kind of the yes of that?

Could you imagine a set of readers reading your argument and saying, "Yes, but..." And maybe that but is something they already know about, right, yes, but, what about this. Or maybe it's a new area of inquiry for them: Yes, but how about if we apply it to this situation? What would happen? So is it contestable in that way?

You want to try as a writer to try to qualify what you say rather than presenting an argument that applies to every single situation and every possible possibility of life, you probably want to qualify your arguments in a way that makes them more contestable in this kind of positive way.

Complex ~ that means not obvious or simple. And we talked about this with Coyle, right. The concept that many of us might have heard before we even read Coyle, that practice makes perfect. So how is it that Coyle was trying to make his argument more complex, right? To build beyond the idea that practice makes perfect. What was he saying that was different?

And I think that what he was saying that was different was this concept of mistakes and that was how he made his argument more complex.

And finally, clear. And clear means even at the same time as it's complex, contestable, compelling and connected, is it relatively...Can readers ~ if they're careful readers and they think about what you're writing ~ will they be able to understand what you're saying? And you ultimately do want readers to know what you're saying.

So let's look at an example from Colvin. I've identified these three sentences as part of where he articulates his argument. There are probably other arguments and moments in his piece where he does that, so these aren't the only sentences where his argument comes out, but I do think his argument comes out here.

Let's match them against the criteria of effective claims that we've outlined to see if there are...If it...Is it or is it not effective according to these criteria.

And I should say that there might be other criteria that you end up deciding needs to be added to the 5 Cs. So by all means, please add a 6<sup>th</sup> C or a 7<sup>th</sup> C or add other words that don't even match with Cs. That's ok, too.

The critical reality is that we are not hostage to some naturally granted level of talent. We can make ourselves what we will. Strangely, that idea is not popular.

What I first want to point out is that this is not one sentence where he embeds his entire argument and achieves all of the effective Cs of claim criteria in one sentence. Often, our arguments, in order to be really complex, compelling, contestable, connected, and clear ~ they need to be more than one sentence. So it's fine to have more than one sentence.

Sometimes also, they can't appear until a certain place in your project, because you just need time to show how it's connected or how it's compelling. So arguments also don't have to be at the very beginning of an essay or even at the end of the first paragraph of an essay. You might have heard that before. It varies.

So, in terms of compelling, our first criterion, I would give Colvin a checkmark because I think that at least a certain number of people would find this compelling. Now notice I didn't say everyone would find it compelling because that would be too extreme and unqualified a statement. So I want to make a qualified statement. I think a fair portion of human beings care about cultivating talent, they want to become more expert at whatever it is they want to become more expert at, so it's at least relatively compelling to a fair number of people.

Is it contestable? The part that I think makes it contestable is this part: We can make ourselves what we will, because I feel like that actually some people could read this and say, "Well, maybe *some* people can make ourselves what we will, but not everybody can. Certainly there are environmental factors that come into play with making ourselves what we will. Do we have enough time, leisure, access to resources that can help us become what we want? Do we have even a way of knowing what it is that we want or what the possibilities are? That all. So I think this sentence is contestable.

And that doesn't mean that I'm going to cut Colvin and I'm gonna show him why he's wrong. It just means that this is an ongoing scholarly conversation, right? And if I were writing about this, I might build on this particular sentence. So yes, it's contestable.

Is it complex? Yes. I think phrases like the critical reality, naturally granted level of talent, ideas that are popular or not....all of those are complex ideas and concepts. And the interplay between talent and work or nature and nurture is a complex idea.

Is it connected? Yes. I think prior to this, he's been showing how he's going to build against what others commonly think or what others have claimed to be true and so it's connected to the work of scholarship.

And is it clear? I do think it's clear.

There's a check for connected. I do also think it's clear. I get what he's saying. As a reader, I understand it. I might not have gotten it the first time. Maybe I did, but some readers might have had to read it several times in order to get it, but eventually you can understand it, so it's clear.

Let's look at another example of a claim by a woman who is named Doris Santoro, who's working on cultivating expertise in teaching.

"This article puts forth an argument that the moral rewards embedded in the teaching profession are endangered in these difficult times. Too often, the inability to access the moral rewards of teaching is misdiagnosed as burnout. This article shows that it is better to conceive of the foreclosure of the moral rewards as demoralization."

Ok. So, compelling. I find it compelling because issues about teacher burnout, moral rewards of teaching, the teaching profession...I am a teacher so I'm interested in it. Presumably some other subset of teachers are going to care about this. It is a compelling area of inquiry.

Is it contestable? Yes, because actually she's weighing in within a particular argument, right? Is something called burnout or is something called demoralization ~ and she's participating in an ongoing debate.

It is complex. I needed to read this several times in order to kind of get the full weight of her argument. And that goes to the clarity, too. So I think it ultimately is clear and it ultimately is complex. Again it doesn't mean that it's simple; it just means that ultimately you can, you can keep reading, if you keep persisting enough, you'll get it.

And then it's connected. It's connected, as I said, to an ongoing debate: "too often, the inability to access the moral rewards of teaching is misdiagnosed as burnout." So she's participating in this ongoing dialogue.

As you continue to read the works of others and write your own scholarship, please do think about these five criteria. And again, you can change them. You can take out some criteria or add some more as you see fit. And different writing projects will kind of prioritize various criteria over others. And that's fine, but do keep these in mind as you're writing your own arguments.