

1

What do you do when you argue a case?



I shall aim in this chapter to explain:

- k'U bU h [i aWc bObg] Zg/h g
- k'k YX lk \ YkbYf Y U g c b /
- \Ub\lk f [i \Ub\bg\lk\U\efi g\ g h] c b /
- k\j\duYhU b g f W\Wc b W` i g] c b "

Claims and conclusions

You have read the Introduction to this book, and you have turned the page to this chapter: so, you may well be someone with a case to make—an argument to advance—in writing or in a speech. Perhaps you have been given (or you have given yourself) a topic to write about or a question to answer; and your job is to persuade your readers or listeners to agree with your main claim.

Let us say that you are a student of geography and you have to write about:

Iceland and the European mainland

or you are studying American literature, and you have chosen this topic:

Political commitment in the novels of John Steinbeck

or you are writing in the field of business studies, on this subject:

The takeover of Cadbury by Kraft Foods

or you are a student of psychology and you are presented with this:

The importance of attachment in language acquisition

None of these ‘titles’ is a *question*, so none of them asks you to argue a case. They are just noun phrases which invite you to write, simply, ‘what you know’ about the topic. I shall have more to say about titles and questions—and titles-as-questions—later in this chapter.

Each phrase sets up an association between two objects, **P** and **Q**: for example, Iceland (in particular) and Europe (in general). This is how we advance knowledge—by investigating the association between two objects. In the physical sciences, the hope is that the association between **P** and **Q** might be so strong as to amount to a law; in the social sciences and humanities, the association is more open to question.

These objects might be *places* (Iceland); *people* (John Steinbeck); *institutions* (Cadbury); *ideas* (political commitment); *social behaviour* (language acquisition)—they can be anything at all.

1a. Can you think of a title that you have been given, in any subject, that did **not** ask you about an association between two (or more) objects?

It is **implied** in each of the previous titles that the two objects referred to are associated in some significant way. We can easily make the phrases into sentences, and the sentences into **claims**.

Iceland is a Nordic country nearly 1,000km distant from the European mainland.

Steinbeck is a writer who made his political position quite clear.

Cadbury was an iconic British brand when it was bought by US giant Kraft Foods.

Attachment to a primary carer is important for a child’s acquisition of language.

What was **implicit** in the phrases is now **explicit** in the claims. Claims on their own do not carry a lot of weight—though, perhaps, the more well known the claimants are, the more weight their claims carry. You have probably heard of these claimants:

Communism fits Germany as a saddle fits a cow.

JOSEPH STALIN, Soviet leader, 1944

The one duty we owe to history is to rewrite it.

OSCAR WILDE, Irish writer, 1891

There is only one really serious problem in philosophy, and that is suicide. To assess whether life is worth living or not is to answer the fundamental question of philosophy.

ALBERT CAMUS, French existentialist writer, 1942

The noblest prospect which a Scotchman ever sees is the high road that leads to England.

DR SAMUEL JOHNSON, English writer, 1763

No man is good enough to govern another man without that other's consent.

ABRAHAM LINCOLN, 16th US President, 1854

Whoever lights the torch of war in Europe can wish for nothing but chaos.

ADOLF HITLER, German Nazi Party leader, 1935

Lincoln's claim is weighty because of who he was and because we all believe in some sort of democracy now; Wilde's claim is weighty, as well as witty, because, though his observation would seem to be flippan t, he has put his finger on precisely what it is that historians do; and Hitler's claim is weighty because, within ten years, he had lit the torch, and had indeed brought chaos down upon everybody's heads.

Each of these claims is, in effect, the **conclusion**—or *main claim*—of an implicit **argument**. Dr Johnson might have said: 'Scotland is a wet, wild, grim sort of place, whereas England is a thriving, balmy, lush arcadia'. His line about the high road to England would then have been his conclusion—the punchline with which he hoped we might agree. All but loyal Scots might have done so.

A claim might be a definition, such as this:

An expert is one who is familiar with some of the worst errors that can be made in his field, and who succeeds in avoiding them.

WERNER HEISENBERG, German physicist, 1969

It might be a recommendation:

In politics, if you want anything said, ask a man. If you want anything done, ask a woman.

MARGARET THATCHER, UK Conservative politician, 1975

It might be a prediction (or wishful thinking):

Palestine is a country without a people; the Jews are a people without a country. The regeneration of the soil would bring the regeneration of the people.

ISRAEL ZANGWILL, US author of *The Melting Pot*, 1901

Or it might—perhaps like most claims—be a simple expression of opinion:

The man who is a pessimist before 48 knows too much; if he is an optimist after it, he knows too little.

MARK TWAIN, US writer, 1902

A single claim is generally not persuasive on its own. Indeed, even a barrage of claims may not be persuasive:

Franklin D. Roosevelt is no crusader. He is no tribune of the people. He is no enemy of entrenched privilege. He is a pleasant man who, without any important qualifications for the office, would very much like to be President.

WALTER LIPPmann, American journalist, 1932

1b. How many claims does Lippmann make here? Which of them appears to be the **main** claim, the conclusion?

Lippmann wants us to believe two things: one is that it was Roosevelt's ambition to be president; and the other is that he was ill-qualified for the office. But he does not give us any **reasons** for believing either of these claims. I supplied two reasons for coming to Dr Johnson's conclusion and so constructed a simple argument:

-
- [R1] Scotland is a wet, wild, grim sort of place.
 - [R2] England is a thriving, balmy, lush arcadia.

-
- [C] The noblest prospect which a Scotchman ever sees is the high road that leads to England.

Reasons give *grounds* for accepting the conclusion—or not, as in this case (since neither reason is ‘true’). Here are two rather better reasons for coming to Wilde’s conclusion:

-
- [R1] ‘History’ is what historians write, but they do not write it for all time.
 - [R2] We do not have to accept the judgements made by historians of an earlier generation.

-
- [C] The one duty we owe to history is to rewrite it.

It is not enough merely to *assert* a claim if we wish to persuade an audience to accept it. We need to back that claim with reasons. Lippmann made a series of assertions about Roosevelt. If what he said is to be an argument, the grounds for claiming that Roosevelt was not qualified to be president would need to be made explicit.

Reasons and inference

The difference between an argument and a non-argument is no sharper than the difference between fiction and non-fiction. This argument might have been written by a journalist:

1. The one great principle of the English law is to make business for itself. There is no other principle distinctly, certainly, and consistently maintained through all its narrow turnings. Viewed by this light it becomes a coherent scheme and not the monstrous maze the laity are apt to think it. Let them once clearly perceive that its grand principle is to make business for itself at their expense, and surely they will cease to grumble.

In fact, it comes from Chapter 39 of the novel *Bleak House*, by Charles Dickens. Many novels (and plays) are arguments in fictional disguise. One might, equally, come across an argument in verse:

2. The rain it raineth on the just | And also on the unjust fella | But chiefly on the just, because | The unjust steals the just's umbrella.

CHARLES, LORD BOWEN, English judge (1835–94)



Bowen **explains** that the innocent may suffer as much as, if not more than, the guilty. It is sometimes difficult to tell **explanation** from argument, and, indeed, the difference is not hard and fast. It might be said that, when one explains, one is not trying to persuade; that persuasion is what marks out argument. Is the following an argument, or simply an explanation?

- When a dog bites a man, that is not news, because it happens so often. But if a man bites a dog, that is news.

JOHN B. BOGART, US journalist, 1918

Bogart explains that only what is unusual is news. Bowen and Bogart are both explaining, but they are **reasoning**, too: they are both saying that one claim serves as a reason for another claim:

$$P, \text{ and so } Q \text{ (or } P \rightarrow Q)$$

The unjust man steals the just man's umbrella (**P**), so the just man gets wetter than the unjust man (**Q**). A man biting a dog is unusual (**P**), so it's news (**Q**). **P** implies **Q**; from **P**, we can **infer** **Q**—that is, we understand **Q** to be a consequence of **P**. When the association between two claims, **P** and **Q**, is an **inference** of one from the other (**P**, and so **Q**) it is fair to say that we have an argument.

Explanation by itself may not equate to argument; but it may well be that explanation will play a *part* in argument. (I shall have a little more to say about this in Chapter 2.)

Was President Barack Obama arguing or explaining, in this extract from his January 2010 State of the Union Address?

- From the first railroads to the interstate highway system, our nation has always been built to compete. There's no reason Europe or China should have the fastest trains, or the new factories that manufacture clean products.

China is not waiting to revamp its economy. Germany is not waiting. India is not waiting. These nations aren't playing for second place. They're putting more emphasis on math and science. They're building their infrastructure. They're making serious investments in clean energy because they want those jobs. Well, I do not accept second place for the United States of America.

He was certainly trying to persuade his listeners to think or to do something—and this is the conventional definition of an argument. He drew the conclusion—he inferred, and he wanted his listeners to infer—from his claims about the United States' past, and other countries' present policies, that the United States should invest in its infrastructure.

In the following passage, a journalist and BBC presenter explains why he is writing a history of the world:

- Writing a history of the world is a ridiculous thing to do. The amount of information is too vast for any individual to absorb, the

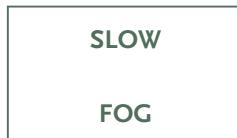
reading limitless and the likelihood of error immense. The only case for doing it, and for reading it, is that not having a sense of world history is even more ridiculous. Looking back can make us better at looking about us. The better we understand how rulers lose touch with reality, or why revolutions produce dictators more often than they produce happiness, or why some parts of the world are richer than others, the easier it is to understand our own times.

ANDREW MARR, *A History of the World*,
London: Macmillan Publishers, 2012

1C. To what extent would you say Marr's explanation is also an argument? Is there a **P** from which he infers a **Q**? Is there a claim or claims from which he draws a conclusion?

Perhaps when we make any claim, whether in speech or in writing, we want to persuade others to do or think something; but it may not be safe only to imply **Q**—readers or listeners may not infer the **Q** that you had in mind.

This warning—which is just about the shortest argument that can be imagined—could not leave it to drivers to infer what they should do or think:



We have two one-word claims: one tries to persuade motorists to slow down—the conclusion; the other tells them why they should do so—the reason. And it is a good reason (as long as the fog has not lifted, and it is the sun that is the problem). The reason is not such a good one in this warning posted in an American washroom:



It is far from clear what danger one might pose to the mirror, or to oneself, just by looking at it. A claim-as-conclusion might come before a claim-as-reason, or it might follow it. It is not always obvious which is which. Dora Russell, second wife of the philosopher Bertrand Russell, made this claim in 1925:

We want better reasons for having children than not knowing how to prevent them.

Is this claim the conclusion of an argument looking something like this?

[C] We want better reasons for having children than not knowing how to prevent them.

[R1] One such reason is that having children is a life-affirming and fulfilling experience.

[R2] Another is that the country's future depends upon couples wanting children and establishing families.

Or is it a reason in an argument looking something like this?

[R1] Many couples who have children don't really want them.

[R2] We want better reasons for having children than not knowing how to prevent them.

[C] So, couples need help to prevent having children they don't really want.

This second argument is more likely to have been what Dora Russell meant; she was, after all, a doughty campaigner for better birth control.

Whether the main claim is made first or last, it is unlikely by itself to be as persuasive as one that has the backing of one or more claims-as-reasons.

1d. Can you think of two claims (as reasons) that Hitler might have given for his claim (as a conclusion) in the previous section, p 3?

Consider this claim by the Scots-born journalist who founded the *New York Herald*:

A newspaper can send more souls to Heaven, and save more from Hell, than all the churches or chapels in New York—besides making money at the same time.

JAMES GORDON BENNETT Sr, 1831

By itself, this would seem a curious claim to make. Are we to infer from it that:

H \] Yg\ f cYf fYY `]] [t\ b\ Y\ b\ g\ d\ lhd\ Y\ f\ b\ i\ f\ W\ b\ Y
chapels?
· > c\ i\ f\ b\ u\ j\ a\`c\] f\ d\ Y\ b\ l\ g\ Y\ b\ U\ b\ l\ Y\ h\ X\ g\ b\ Y\ f\ [m\ a\ Y\ b\ 3
· H\ b\ l\ Y\ k\ h\ g\ Y\ U\ V\ l\ c\ Y\ f\ g\ c\ f\ a\ c\ b\ g\ 3
· C\ W\ U\ b\ q\ c\ d\ J\ b\ a\ K\ U\ _a\ Y\ b\ V\ h\ n\ g\ Y\ a\ h\ Y\ a\ Y\ 3

In fact, Bennett's claim was itself his (rather dubious) inference from a number of (rather dubious) claims-as-reasons:

6. What is to prevent a daily newspaper from being made the greatest organ of social life? Books have had their day—the theatres have had their day—the temple of religion has had its day. A newspaper can be made to take the lead of all these in the great movements of human thought and of human civilization. A newspaper can send more souls to Heaven, and save more from Hell, than all the churches or chapels in New York—besides making money at the same time.

Bennett's conclusion is a curious—perhaps even outrageous—inference from the other claims that he makes (each of them amply disproved); but it would have been even less persuasive on its own. (Or is the question at the beginning Bennett's main conclusion? Or is it the third sentence? Would Bennett have been able to tell us?)

We might say of a claim: 'Yes, I agree with that', or 'No, I don't agree with that' (or 'I would need to know more before I decide') and, indeed, this is often how a title for a piece of writing is presented. Here is an example from economics:

'Competition brings out the best in products and the worst in people' (David Sarnoff, US broadcasting pioneer).

How far do you agree with this statement?

And here is another one from religious studies:

'The more the fruits of knowledge become accessible to men, the more widespread is the decline of religious belief' (Sigmund Freud, pioneer psychiatrist).

To what extent, if at all, do you agree with this view?

Neither Sarnoff nor Freud backed up his claim. For all we know, the claims might have been made in a vacuum. It is likely, though, that both men gave some thought to the effects of competition and of the growth of knowledge, respectively, before making claims of such a resounding sort. In this case, their claims were inferences from experience. In answering these questions (or ones like them), you would have to provide reasons for agreeing or disagreeing with the claims—or for suspending judgement if you are simply not persuaded either way.

Titles as questions

There is this, at least, to be said for the two previous questions: they are *questions*. All new knowledge is obtained by asking questions: it is how children learn, and it is where research begins. If we did not ask questions, we would have to make do with claims handed down to us, just as for centuries our forebears settled for the claims of Aristotle, and understanding of the world was held back until the Renaissance.

James Gordon Bennett asked himself a question quite explicitly, in Argument 6: ‘What is to prevent a daily newspaper from being made the greatest organ of social life?’

1e. What questions do Barack Obama and Andrew Marr ask themselves (implicitly) in Arguments 4 and 5?

Our original four titles could easily enough be reworded as questions:

- To what extent can Iceland be called a European country?
- In what sense did John Steinbeck write from a decided political position?
- Why did the takeover of Cadbury by Kraft Foods prove to be controversial?
- How important for language acquisition is attachment to a primary carer?

I have considered three sorts of title: the noun-phrase, the claim, and the question. When you ask a question (what is the precise relationship between P and Q?), you have a fixed target at which to aim; if

you set yourself to write all you know, or all you can find out, *about P* and *Q*, your target is a pair of birds flying away from you in different directions.

Consider the political-science title: ‘The idea of a united Europe’: this noun-phrase seems to invite a simple display of knowledge, though it gives you little idea about where you might start. The title as a claim would, at least, invite an argument:

‘The idea of a united Europe is unrealistic.’ Discuss.

But it is still very open: the discussion could begin and end almost anywhere.

In the Introduction to this book, I gave this as an example of a title: ‘How realistic is the idea of a United States of Europe?’ Why is this a ‘better’ title? I will answer my own question in the form of a simple argument, marking my reasons, and the conclusion as I do so:

7. There are several reasons why it is a good idea to write in answer to a title in the form of a question. [R1] If you were to write to the title: ‘The idea of a United Europe’, it would be difficult to know where to start and where to finish—whole books have been written on the subject. Asking a specific question can give your writing a sharper focus than taking a statement as your title is likely to do. [R2] A question helps you to determine what material is relevant—what information actually answers the question—and what material you can discard because it doesn’t. [R3] What is more, setting yourself a question makes what otherwise might seem to be an arid exercise in reproducing what others have written into a piece of (more or less) genuine research: it is your question and your answer; it is your argument and, therefore, you may be stimulated into making it as persuasive as possible. For these reasons, [C] it is advisable to word, or to reword, a title as a question.

if. Is my conclusion persuasive? Can you think of other reasons for coming to it? Can you think of reasons for coming to an alternative conclusion?

What I have tried to do in the previous argument is to reason: to engage with you in an act of reasoning. What I did was:

Address a question
(What sort of essay title is best?)



Make a **statement** as to the conclusion that I would probably come to



Identify my **reasons** for coming to this conclusion (three of them, in this case)



State that **conclusion** so as to make it clear that it follows from the reasons.

This is what an argument is; and it is the process you go through (not always systematically) when you argue (using the word in its reasoning, rather than quarrelling sense) in conversation.

When you are presented with a title that is not a question, you might convert it into one—if only at the planning stage—so that what you write will be an argument and not a mere catalogue of claims. Here is an example:

‘Literature is news that STAYS news’ (Ezra Pound). Discuss.

You might convert this to:

In what sense is literature ‘news’ that is always news?

Or you might convert it into two questions:

1. In what sense is literature ‘news’? 2. How does it continue to be ‘news’?

There has been a lot of ‘literature’; so it would be wise to answer the question by reference to, say, one poem, one play, and one novel, as case studies (making reference to other works, perhaps, in less detail). Here is another example:

Analyse the part played by family breakdown in youth crime.

Here, too, there is a *what* question, and a *how* question:

1. What can we learn from the statistics about youth crime in the UK?
2. How big a proportion of crime is accounted for by youths from broken homes?

There has been a lot of family breakdown, and a lot of youth crime. If you were writing to a title like this, you would need either to refine it further ('What part was played by family breakdown in youth crime in the UK/United States/Illinois/1950–2000/what part does it play in the present?'); or you would need to make it clear in your opening **statement** that you will confine your attention to this or that place, at this or that time.

It is good practice to break a question down into *sub-questions*. Thus, the question:

Why did the takeover of Cadbury by Kraft Foods prove to be controversial?

can be broken down into these (or other) sub-questions:



K k U T U X V i] f V _ M Y Z l c Y h Y U _ Y c j Y f 3
< X] K T X U X V f i Y g m d h c o f X U d h c g c g U ` g 3
< Z W K f] h X \ f] Y g d b g h W W h Y i h W c a Y 3

A Word of
Advice

By breaking down a question into sub-questions, you can begin to set the parts of your overall argument into a meaningful order, and give direction to your thinking.

Support for a conclusion

Consider these claims:

The French are a logical people, which is one reason the English dislike them so intensely. The other is that they own France, a country which we have always judged to be much too good for them.

ROBERT MORLEY, English comic actor, 1974

Morley has asked himself why the English dislike the French and he gives two reasons to explain the dislike. He might have inferred from these two reasons that:

The English are justified in disliking the French.

Or that:

The English always will dislike the French.

Had he drawn either of these conclusions, he would have given us an argument; and he would probably have caused one, in the quarrelling sense, because his reasons do not **support** either conclusion. They might be said to give support to this one:

Logic being of less importance than cheese and wine, many English people have gone to live in France.

Morley was a comedian, so reasoning was not what he was about. The writer of the following was not reasoning, either:

I occasionally play works by contemporary composers and for two reasons. First, to discourage the composer from writing any more, and secondly to remind myself how much I appreciate Beethoven.

JASCHA HEIFETZ, Russian-Polish-born US violinist, 1961



Heifetz might have come to any one of these conclusions:

Music by contemporary composers isn't worth the paper it's written on.

Contemporary composers cannot write worthwhile music for the violin.

There's really only one composer of note, and that's Beethoven.

But his 'two reasons' would not have supported any of these conclusions; they go too far beyond what the reasons imply. All that is implied by what he wrote—all that he could reasonably want us to infer—is that his taste in music was rather late classical than modern.

Here is another set of ‘reasons’ that does not amount to an argument:

Troops always ready to act, my well-filled treasury, and the liveliness of my disposition—these were my reasons for making war on Maria Theresa.

FREDERICK II, King of Prussia, 1741

Frederick uses the word ‘reasons’, but he isn’t *reasoning*; he might think he is explaining, but perhaps a despot does not need to do even this. Might is right, and there’s an end to it.

Here is a set of reasons that *does* amount to an argument (whose conclusion is italicized):

8. Our land is the dearer for our sacrifices. The blood of our martyrs sanctifies and enriches it. Their spirit passes into thousands of hearts. How costly is the progress of the race. *It is only by giving of life that we can have life.*

E.J. YOUNG, US pastor, 1865

A great deal of young male blood was shed in the American Civil War, and it is understandable that a pastor should want to put a positive gloss on the waste; but his consecration of the slaughter cannot support the weight of his extravagant conclusion.

1g. What alternative, less extravagant, conclusion might we draw from the claims that Young makes?

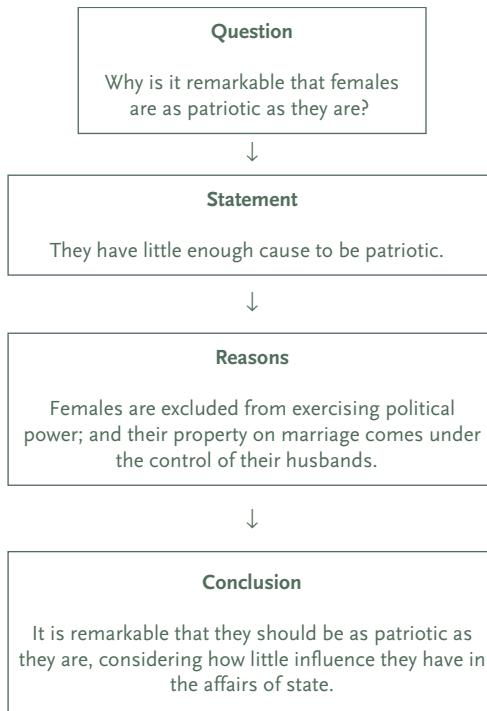
A comedian, a forthright violinist, a despot, a minister of religion might have been expected to overstate their case; a well-born lady, in the late 18th century, was more likely to underestimate it:

9. Patriotism in the female sex is the most disinterested of all virtues. Excluded from honors and from offices, we cannot attach ourselves to the State or Government from having had a place of eminence. Even in the freest countries our property is subject to the control and disposal of our partners, to whom the laws have given a sovereign authority. Deprived of a voice in legislation, obliged to submit to those laws which are imposed upon us, is it not sufficient to make us indifferent to the public welfare? Yet all history and every age exhibit instances of patriotic virtue in the female sex; which considering our situation equals the most heroic of yours.

ABIGAIL ADAMS, in a letter to her husband, John Adams, 1782

John Adams was one of the Founding Fathers (and the second president) of the United States; but he could not have acted upon her pioneering views if he had wanted to—for all that her ‘reasons’ give very adequate support to her modest conclusion.

We can set out her argument in much the same way that I set out my own argument, in the previous section.



Here, now, is a longer argument, set out in a speech by the Irish president, on the 50th anniversary of the Easter Rising of 1916:

10. We cannot adequately honour the men of 1916 if we do not work and strive to bring about the Ireland of their desire. For this each one of us must do his part, and though the tasks immediately before us now are different from those of fifty years ago, we can have today, if we are sufficiently devoted and our will is firm, a national resurgence comparable to that which followed 1916.

In the realization of this our national language has a vital role. Language is a chief characteristic of nationhood—the embodiment, as it were, of the personality and the closest bond between its people. No nation with a language of its own would willingly abandon it. The peoples of Denmark, Holland, Norway, for example,

learn and know well one or more other languages, as we should, of course, for the sake of world communication, commerce and for cultural purposes; but they would never abandon their native language, the language of their ancestors, the language which enshrines all the memories of their past. They know that without it they would sink into an amorphous cosmopolitanism—without a past or a distinguishable future. To avoid such a fate, we of this generation must see to it that our language lives. That would be the resolve of the men and women of 1916.

EAMON DE VALERA, President of the
Republic of Ireland, 10 April 1966

1h. What question would you think de Valera was addressing? And which of his claims would seem to be the ‘conclusion’ of his argument? (You might highlight this, and label the reasons that he puts forward to support it, as I did in Argument 7.)

So far, then, we have seen that when you argue a case, you:

- frame or reframe your title as a **question** that you may need to refine;
- make **claims** the most significant of which is your **conclusion**;
- present these claims as **reasons** from which you **infer** the conclusion;
- take care not to infer more than the reasons **imply**;
- and thus ensure that your reasons **support** the conclusion that you draw.

When you have framed the question that you will answer, you will have some idea what your response to this question will be—what your main claim, or conclusion, will be. Do you, though, make a claim and then look for evidence to support it:

Claim → Evidence

or do you look for evidence first and only then draw your conclusion?

Evidence → Claim

In a letter, dated 8 December 1874, Charles Darwin wrote:

I must begin with a good body of facts and not from a principle.

For Darwin, evidence came before claim—at least, this is what he implies here. In fact, he had a pretty good idea what he was looking for (a ‘principle’; a theory; a claim that he would make) in order to know what facts would be of use to him. It is no good looking for evidence before knowing what it might be evidence of.

On the other hand, if you make a claim—or advance a theory—before you have the evidence to support it, you are all too likely to ‘find’ the evidence that suits your purpose. The safest way to proceed is to argue from claim (theory) to evidence, but to be prepared to revise your claim in the course of constructing your argument.

Claim ← → Evidence → Revised claim

Your first source of evidence will be what others have said in answer to the question—and I shall have more to say about this in Chapter 3. Meanwhile, though, how strong your own argument is going to be will depend, partly, on whether or not you make yourself clear. Chapter 2 is about how you might do this.