

Making Arguments: Claims, Reasons, Evidence

A Handout from the EcoTeach Center, Duke University
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Much of the writing you will do in your economics classes is meant to persuade. Whether you are writing a short-essay answer to an exam or a term paper, you are usually being asked to state a position or an answer—and then defend or support it. In other words, you are asked to make an argument. But just how does one do that?

An excellent guide to the task is *The Craft of Research* (2d ed.), by Wayne C. Booth, Gregory G. Colomb, and Joseph M. Williams (Chicago, 2003). Booth, Colomb, and Williams define a research argument as follows: A *claim* based on one or more *reasons*, reasons that are supported by *evidence*. Let's look at each of those in turn.

A *claim* is another word for thesis. It is a statement, not of fact, but of interpretation or point of view and thus needs support. "America has 50 states" is a fact and hence no thesis. "Wyoming is the greatest state in America" is an interpretation, a claim, and hence needs to be explained or defended. (One could reasonably argue instead that California or Delaware or Missouri was the greatest state.)

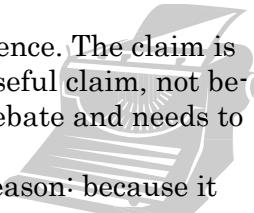
A claim, for its part, is made because of a *reason*. Reasons explain *why* we believe a claim to be true. But merely providing reasons is not enough. Reasons must be supported by *evidence*—information regarded as fact. Statistics and the conclusions of other research reports are among the items that can serve as evidence.

Suppose you are asked to write a paper explaining the pros and cons of a flat income tax. You are to support your points with evidence and, in the end, take a position for or against, explaining your reasons. How might the core of your argument look? Here is one hypothetical example:

A flat tax should replace our current progressive one because it would better stimulate economic growth. Two recent theoretical papers, Marshall 2000 and Walker 2002, show that a flat tax would encourage investment in the software industry. Another recent theoretical paper (Abrams 2003) suggests that the American automobile industry would have benefited from a flat tax in the late 1970s. And congressional testimony by CFOs of prominent companies alludes to the likely stimulative effects of a flat tax.

Let's examine the argument in light of claims, reasons, and evidence. The claim is that a flat tax should replace the current one. Great. That is a useful claim, not because it is "true" or a fact, but because it is open to reasonable debate and needs to be supported.

But why make such a claim? On what basis is it made? Reason: because it



would stimulate economic growth.

Fine. We have a claim, and we have the reason for the claim. But the reason needs to be supported. We need evidence suggesting that growth would be stimulated as the result of a flat tax. What evidence does the argument provide? It refers to three scholarly papers and testimony by CFOs.

Let's revisit our argument, this time by labeling each component: claim, reason, evidence.

A flat tax should replace our current progressive one_{claim} because it would better stimulate economic growth._{reason} Two recent theoretical papers, Marshall 2000 and Walker 2002, show that a flat tax would encourage investment in the software industry._{evidence 1} Another recent theoretical paper (Abrams 2003) suggests that the American automobile industry would have benefited from a flat tax in the late 1970s._{evidence 2} And congressional testimony by CFOs of prominent companies alludes to the likely stimulative effects of a flat tax._{evidence 3}

Now: is the evidence appropriate or trustworthy or valid? Well, that's for you, the writer-researcher, and your reader, to decide. Part of making an effective argument is selecting evidence that your reader will find persuasive.

The formula just described can differ depending on the situation. In the typical empirical economics paper, for instance, the reasons for a claim are usually not explicitly stated. (The reason behind the claim would be that a model, which has been tested with data, bears the claim out.) The evidence would be the particulars of the data, model, and methodology themselves.

Recall that one makes a claim because of a reason. But are the two logically connected, or mutually relevant? Why should one accept your claim, even if it is based on reason supported by evidence? The answer is a reader may not. If that is potentially the case, you will need to state how your reason is relevant to your claim.

The principle that connects your claim to your reason is what Booth, Co-lomb, and Williams call a *warrant*. A warrant explains how your reason is relevant to your claim. Your reader can accept the truth of your reason, but not necessarily its relevance. In the argument about the flat tax, for example, a reader could react as follows: "Why is economic growth a desirable objective of tax reform? Why should a tax that stimulates economic growth be favored over another kind of tax? Why, for example, should it be favored over a tax that further redistributes income, or a tax that discourages certain behaviors?" Your answer, if you choose to provide one, would be your warrant. Your warrant may be that economic growth is simply good or desirable—a warrant, in this case, based on a cultural or discipline-specific norm. Ultimately, a reader may have to take your warrant on faith.