

Crafting Controversial Claims

LESSON PLAN

Purpose/Learning Intentions: Understand how a claim should be clear, defensible, and controversial. Practice creating data, evaluating data, and applying criteria.

Length: Approximately 45 minutes

Materials Needed

- A class set of Handout 7.1, “Rating Claims”
- Large paper to record and save students’ ideas on an anchor chart

Lesson Steps

Step 1: Relate this lesson to what has preceded.

- Remind students that in their previous lesson, we have been engaging in the kind of everyday arguments that they have as a matter of course in their lives. Recall that yesterday, they had practice working with all three of the primary elements of argument: data, warrants, and claims.
- Explain that today we’re going to focus specifically on just one of those elements, claims.

Step 2: Generate criteria for what makes a good claim.

- Distribute Handout 7.1.
- Ask students to work individually to fill out the first scale. Once students have marked the scale, have them do a think-pair-share with a classmate to explain and discuss their rating.
- As students talk, circulate to see what students are saying. If discussions are lagging, say, “How did you rate Mrs. Herzog’s claim? What makes you say so?”

UNIT CONTEXT:

Practicing with the elements of argument. This is the first in the series of six lessons.

LESSON BACKGROUND:

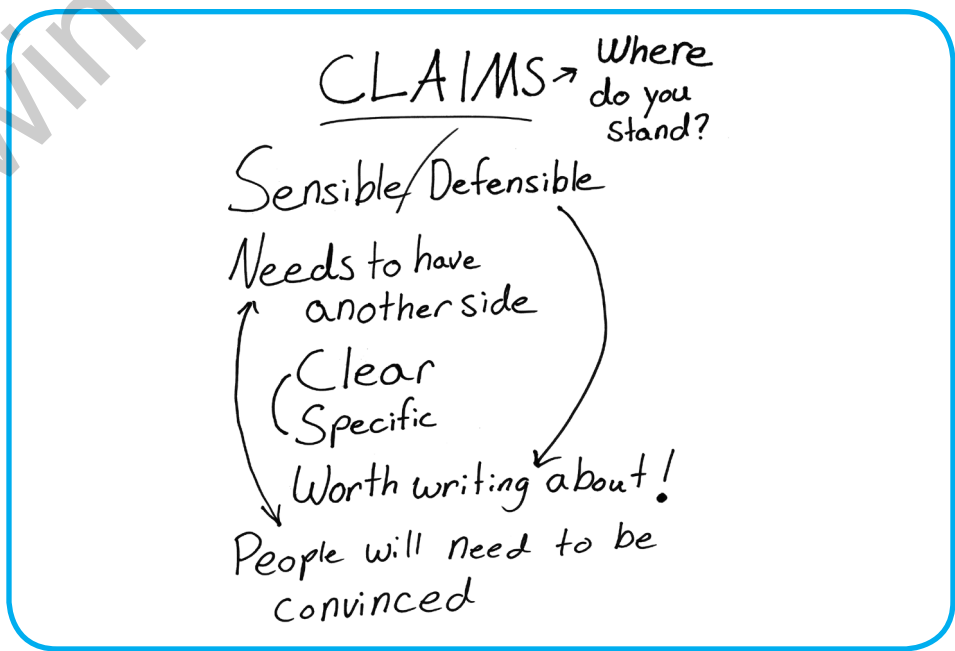
When we think back on our work with students over many years, we’re a bit embarrassed about the work that we did on claims. Sometimes we preempted the need for students to craft their own claims by providing the claim we wanted them to consider in our writing prompt. But we also ran into problems when we asked students to make their own claims. We realize that we spent far too much time in our careers teaching students how to defend untenable or uninteresting claims instead of teaching them the importance of crafting claims that are both defensible and sufficiently controversial to be of interest. The first two lessons in our sequence on practicing with the elements of argument are designed to address this problem.

Step 3: Give students opportunities to apply and refine their thinking.

- Repeat the process with the other three teachers, asking students to mark the scales and then do a think-pair-share. Tell students to work with a different classmate on each scale.
- Once again, as students talk, circulate to see what students are saying. If discussions are lagging, prompt them to defend their rating with the Toulmin question “What makes you say so?”

Step 4: Have a whole-class discussion about students’ rating.

- Get a sense of the whole by asking how many students rated Mrs. Herzog’s claim as the most worth arguing, how many rated Mr. McDonnell’s most worth arguing, how many rated Ms. Callahan’s most worth arguing, and how many rated Mr. Murdoch’s most worth arguing.
- Choose one student and ask him or her to explain why. As you have done before, be consistent using the Toulmin questions “What makes you say so?” and “So what?” to elicit students’ reasoning.
- As students are talking, write the criteria they are applying on an anchor chart titled “Characteristics of Effective Claims.” For example, a student might say something like “I gave Mrs. Herzog a 2 because it seems to me that she shifts from talking about students to talking about parents. You have to be clear,” and you would write “clarity” on the anchor chart. A second student might say something like, “I gave Ms. Callahan a 1 because she doesn’t say anything about what should be done. There has to be some kind of action that can be taken,” and you would write “action” on the anchor chart.



- Use follow-up questions to ask students to apply the criteria they articulate. For example, you might say, “Okay, so clarity is important. How do you think the other three teachers fare on that criterion?”
- Continue discussion until students have no new criteria to explain.

Extension: Have students think about a problem at school, brainstorm for potential solutions, and rank the solutions from the most worth arguing to the one least worth arguing. Ask them to write (or present to class) the justifications for their ranking.

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Rating Claims

SCENARIO: In recent years, Oxford High School has reported very low academic performances from its students. The ratings for academic performance are based primarily on scores from standardized assessments and overall patterns of student attendance. In response to this dilemma, Principal Jones has asked for input from the faculty. Specifically, he has asked teachers to present him with clear arguments for how to address the situation. Four different teachers have responded.

Read each teacher's argument below. Respond to each argument by marking the scales that follow and writing out an explanation to justify your mark on each scale.

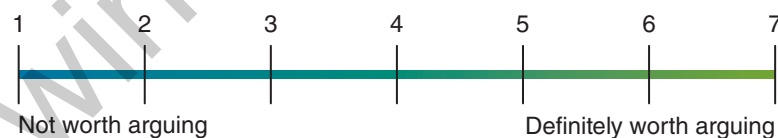
Mrs. Herzog, Math Teacher: Students need to work harder. They sit in class staring at their phones instead of paying attention. They talk over me when I'm trying to teach. Personally, I think it's really the parents who are to blame. The kids in this school obviously don't care about their academics, and there really isn't much teachers can do if the students aren't going to cooperate. We need to start holding the parents more accountable.

Scale A: Mrs. Herzog's claim for how to address the situation is



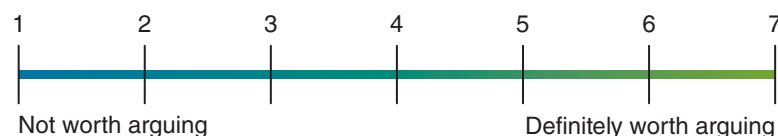
Mr. McDonnell, Social Studies Teacher: Since the middle schools in the area are also performing poorly, many of our students come into ninth grade without a strong foundation in their academic subjects. We need to develop a peer-to-peer mentoring program where juniors and seniors can tutor the freshman students in their core subjects. I know as a teacher of freshmen that I just don't have enough time in the day to help every student in my class who is falling behind.

Scale B: Mr. McDonnell's claim for how to address the situation is



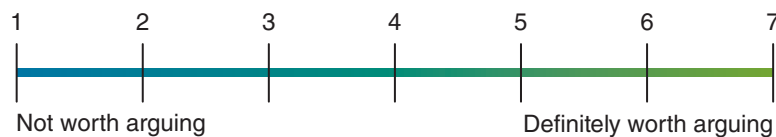
Ms. Callahan, Spanish Teacher: Just because the scores on the standardized tests are low doesn't mean that the kids in the school are all doing poorly. Many of them just don't care about the test, and they don't give it their best effort. Has anyone even tried to examine the tests closely and figure out what they're really measuring? I see plenty of really bright students come through my classroom each year. I honestly don't think the problem is as bad as the test scores make it seem.

Scale C: Ms. Callahan's claim for how to address the situation is



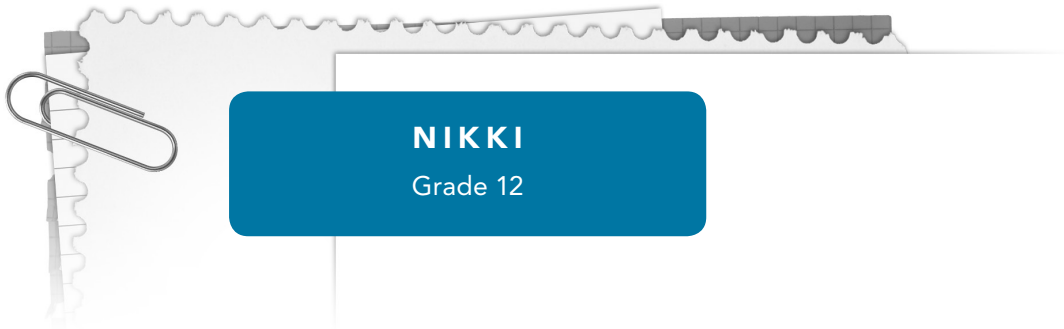
Mr. Murdoch, Science Teacher: My wife has been teaching at Belmont High School in North Philly for the last 10 years. A few years ago, they were having the same problem in their school. The principal worked together with the teachers to improve the quality of learning taking place in their classrooms. Now, the scores at Belmont have improved considerably over the last few years. I think we should do the same thing here at Oxford.

Scale D: Mr. Murdoch's claim for how to address the situation is



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NIKKI

Grade 12

Nikki seems to confuse Ms. Callahan's warrant for her claim.

Here she contemplates the defensibility of Ms. Callahan's claim through an illustrative example.

She eventually restates the claim.

Here she contemplates the debatability of Ms. Callahan's claim by clarifying the procedures by which the claim can be tested.

Ms. Callahan's claim is definitely worth arguing. She says that the standardized test scores have nothing to do with a student's actual intelligence. Just because a student receives a bad score on a standardized test does not mean that they are particularly not learning anything or exceeding in their academics. Many students receive honor roll all year long, and score low on standardized tests. She thinks that examining the tests will help. I agree that by examining these tests and figuring out what they are measuring and what they should be measuring could help with the situation.

Moving Forward

- We need to reinforce the differences between warrants and claims—in this case, claims have immediate and specific applications, whereas warrants can be applied to a range of circumstances.
- Nikki commits strongly to her mark on the scale. We should work with students on considering how different points on the scales may reflect varying degrees of feasibility for a claim.