Writing a Well-Argued Paper
Part One: Strength of Claim

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Learning Outcomes

By the end of Part One of this presentation, you should be able to:

- Understand the importance of argument in academic writing.
- Use language to adjust the strength of your claim.
Overview of Presentation (Part One)

1. Definition of academic argument
2. Argument in different disciplines
3. Strength of claim
4. Words used to hedge and qualify
Definition of Academic Argument

- An academic argument consists of a central claim.
- The claim must be debatable. There must be competing perspectives known as counterarguments.
- The sub-claims are largely expressed in the topic sentences of paragraphs.
- The sub-claims are supported with evidence from the literature, your own research findings, and your own interpretations.
Academic Argument as a Conversation

- An academic argument is not adversarial: It resembles a polite conversation between you and your imagined readers.
- Think of your imagined readers as skeptical and knowledgeable friends.
- They may raise objections and offer alternative points of view or evidence.
- Alternative views are known as counterarguments and evidence for these views as counterevidence.
- You have to convince your readers that you have considered every possibility.
The Thesis As an Argument

Li (2008) made this observation about the thesis:

“An English academic paper is characterized by an argumentative edge. ... Objective and non-confrontational in tone, it uses new evidence to problematize, extend, reinterpret, challenge or reject existing knowledge. The thesis is often a modest refinement of the existing knowledge, but it is never a mere reiteration of the accepted. It stakes out the new territory the project ventures into, hence the edge – edging into the risky world of the unclaimed.”

Arguments Are Made in All Disciplines

“A good thesis isn’t just describing something that happened. It’s about arguing for a position, ideally when there are multiple interpretations possible, and you choose one that matches your understanding of the evidence, and you draw out the evidence to support your argument. You deal with counterevidence that ... might be interpreted in different ways.”

Ann Blair, History professor, Harvard University
http://harvardwrites.com/writing-an-argument/
Arguments Are Made in All Disciplines (continued)

“You are the expert, you are the authority and you can say how it can be. ... Make your claim. Make your argument. That is how knowledge is added to. What we’re really doing is contributing to knowledge, and you can say it’s just a little particle at a time. It’s just a little bit, but sands make the mountain, and every subject and every discipline is made up of relatively small and constant contributions and refinement.”

James Engell, Professor of English and Comparative Literature, Harvard University
http://harvardwrites.com/writing-an-argument/
Arguments Are Made in All Disciplines (continued)

“Technical writing is absolutely the same in terms of argument, in that you’re trying to persuade or convince a reader that your technical approach to a problem is correct. In our world, counterargument is often [that] there are an infinite number of ways that you can do many things. How do you choose the best? … Typically, you need to establish a framework in which you’re going to pose this argument and counterargument. … Whether you’re doing research or anything else, what you’re selling are your ideas. …”

Margo Seltzer, Professor of Computer Science, Harvard University
http://harvardwrites.com/writing-an-argument/
Which Sentence Contains a Claim?

- This paper discusses the use of transdisciplinary research in the study of river ice in northern climates.
- Transdisciplinary research offers the most appropriate methods for studying river ice at a time when rivers, their ecosystems, and the communities they sustain are increasingly threatened by climate change.

Courtesy of a former student
Strength of Claim

Which of these extracts makes the stronger claims?

- Jurisdictional chaos among government agencies caused the delays both in communicating the leak of the Echo Valley pipeline and in remediating the oil spill. If government agencies at the federal and provincial level had clearer roles, oil leaks and spills and their cleanup would be more efficient.

- Evidence suggests that jurisdictional chaos among government agencies contributed to the delays both in communicating the leak of the Echo Valley pipeline and in remediating the oil spill. If government agencies at the federal and provincial level had clearer roles, oil leaks and spills and their cleanup would likely be more efficient.
Strength of Claim (continued)

- Language helps you to convey the strength of your claim.
- If the evidence for your claim is strong, you may choose to convey certainty.
- More often our evidence is inconclusive. For this reason, academic language is cautious.
- One way of being cautious is to hedge. To hedge means to limit or qualify something by expressing conditions or exceptions.
- Hedging helps you to make claims that are proportionate to the evidence.
Strength of Claim: Hedging and Qualifying

Many expressions help you to hedge and qualify. How many can you find in the following sentences? What do they tell you about the writer’s position?

- Contrary to expectations, an analysis of the literature suggests that, on balance, bound chloride presents a corrosion risk, an effect which may be due to its contribution to the reservoir of available chloride at the steel concrete interface.

Strength of Claim: Hedging and Qualifying (continued)

How many expressions used to hedge and qualify and you find in this extract?

- Together with emerging genetic evidence, our *in vivo* findings suggest that IDE hypofunction may underlie or contribute to some forms of AD and DM2 and provide a mechanism for the recently recognized association among hyperinsulinemia, diabetes and AD.

Strength of Claim: Words Used to Weaken Claims

**Verbs** – to appear, to contribute, to tend, to seem, to suggest, to indicate, to estimate

**Modal verbs** – might, may, could, would

**Adjectives** – few, little, probable, possible, relative, some, slight, typical

**Adverbs** – likely, probably, largely, relatively, arguably, typically, possibly

**Nouns** – tendency, likelihood, contribution, indication, probability, possibility

**Expressions** – to some extent, on balance, in principle, up to a point
Fill in the blank with the verb phrases that follow. Decide if the choice of verb phrase results in a strong (S) or weak (W) claim.

“Many studies have concluded that excessive credit growth __________ the 2008 global financial crisis.”

- a. contributed to
- b. caused
- c. may have contributed to
- d. was probably a major cause of
- e. was one of the causes of
- f. might have been a factor in

Summary

- Argumentation is key to all academic writing, no matter the discipline.
- Language helps to convey your strength of claim.
- Most academic writing does not express certainty.
- It uses language that hedges and qualifies.