

## Evaluate and Improve a Claim / Thesis

(Adapted from guidelines for research questions from George Mason University's Writing Center, <http://writingcenter.gmu.edu/writing-resources/wc-quick-guides>)

1. **Clear.** How could the thesis be clearer? How could it be changed to help readers avoid misinterpreting it? How could it be made clear enough that the writer can distinguish between arguments that support it and irrelevant arguments?

**Unclear:** Social networking sites are harmful.

**Clear:** Online users are experiencing privacy issues on such social networking sites as Facebook and Instagram.

The unclear version of this claim doesn't specify which social networking sites or suggest what kind of harm the sites are causing. It also assumes that this "harm" is proven and/or accepted. The clearer version specifies sites (MySpace and Facebook), the type of harm (privacy issues), and whom the issue is harming (users). A strong claim should never leave room for ambiguity or misinterpretation.

2. **Focused.** How could the thesis be made more focused? A claim must be specific enough to be well covered in the space available.

**Unfocused:** Global warming is harming the environment.

**Focused:** Glacial melting is threatening penguins in Antarctica.

The unfocused claim is so broad that it would require a book-length piece to address it thoroughly. The focused version narrows down to a specific cause (glacial melting), a specific place (Antarctica), and a specific group that is affected (penguins). When in doubt, make a claim as narrow and focused as possible.

3. **Complex.** How could the claim be made appropriately complex? A claim should not simply state easily-found facts; it should require analysis on the part of the writer.

**Too simple:** Doctors are fighting diabetes in the U.S.

**Appropriately Complex:** Doctors use common traits of those suffering from diabetes in America to research prevention of the disease.

The simple version of this claim is obvious and also unspecific; it leaves no room for analysis. The more complex version requires both significant investigation and evaluation from the writer.

4. **Arguable.** What could make this claim more arguable? You need someone to convince; who disagrees with you? You need arguments to support your claim; how would you convince someone who disagreed?

**Impossible to prove:** Santa Claus does not exist.

**Possible to make an argument, but no one disagrees:** There is not sufficient evidence to conclude that Santa Claus is a real living person.

**Arguable:** Parents teach their children Santa Claus exists in order to enjoy their children's belief in magic, which the parents can no longer experience themselves.

The first claim is impossible to prove conclusively, because one cannot prove a negative. You can make an argument for the second claim, but there is no one to argue against because everyone in your audience (college students, graduate students, etc.) already agrees. The third claim makes a psychological interpretation of parents' motives which other interpreters might disagree with, but which could be defended with evidence and arguments. (Warning: Be cautious about using psychological interpretations. The best evidence for such an interpretation would probably be a combination of reading similar psychological arguments, and conducting your own interviews with a large number of parents, which would be very hard to organize and conduct in the time you have.)