

From Observations to Claims

What is a claim? And how is a claim different from an observation?

A claim is an interpretation of a textual feature. Observations, while not always obvious, are relatively objective. Two people who are paying attention to the text will generally agree on *what* the text does and *how* it does it (what themes are emphasized, what images are used, what patterns are formed through repetition, what literary devices are employed, what register and tone of language are used, etc.). They will not always agree on *why* these formal features of the text are significant. Because texts can be read in multiple ways, you need to support your claims with evidence from the text *and* convincing analysis that explains how this evidence shows your claim to be true.

1. *Observation*: Bausch's "The Man I Love" depicts a man signing alone on a stage surrounded by bright chrysanthemums.

Claim: In showing a man alone on a stage surrounded only by bright chrysanthemums, "The Man I Love" suggests that the man the protagonist loves is no longer present in his life.

Or: The presence of the bright chrysanthemums surrounding the protagonist in "The Man I Love" overwhelms viewers and shifts their focus away from the story he is telling.

2. *Observation*: The dancers in Graham's "Appalachian Spring" repeatedly clasp their hands together.

Claim: The repeated hand clasping in "Appalachian Spring" appears to assert the importance of religion in this rural Appalachian setting.

Or: The repeated hand clasping in "Appalachian Spring" creates a percussive rhythm which implies that music comes not only from instruments, but from bodies.

Where should I make claims in my writing?

In your thesis statement

We'll talk about this more next week when we have our next thesis workshop.

In every paragraph (typically in the topic sentence)

Example of topic-sentence-level claim: [Ferrante's *My Brilliant Friend*]

In the first chapter of the novel, the fact that Elena, the narrator, never refers to Lila by name...

- a) enacts, textually, the very disappearance Lila seems to have planned.
- b) underscores Elena's first-person narrative control.

In your close readings (detailed analysis of the passages you cite)

Example of a close-reading-level claim: [Ferrante's *My Brilliant Friend*]

When Elena describes her friendship with Lila beginning "the day we decided to go up the dark stairs that led, step after step, flight after flight, to the door of Don Achille's apartment" (27)...

- a) the sentence, with its repeated comma clauses, dramatizes a slow return to childhood memories.
- b) the image of the “dark stairs” could foreshadow difficult aspects of their childhood friendship.

A tip on formulating analytical claims:

Every claim you make should be based on textual evidence (your observations about how the text works) and should explain the significance of these observations for how we read the text. **A truly analytical claim is stated in a way that expresses this relationship:** “X shows that Y,” where X is a feature of the text you have observed, and Y is what you think is meaningful about this observation. Another way of thinking of this relationship is that X is the detail you have noticed and Y is what you are inferring based on this detail. Of course, you don’t want to repeat the same “X shows that Y” formula to express this connection every time. Luckily, English is rich in synonyms.

Using verbs to connect your evidence and your claim

Consider some of the options available and how each one of these verbs affects the meaning of the sentence.

1. *Andersons’s insistence on beginning her essay with “I’ve never been good at math” **shows** a feminist resistance to making sweeping claims of mastery.*
Other options: **demonstrates, illustrates, conveys, reveals, expresses.**
2. *The image of Helen Keller surrounded by the Martha Graham dancers **suggests** that she, too, has joined the choreography.*
Other options: **implies, creates the impression, leads us to believe**
3. *The fact that all of Mistral’s poems have titles that are gendered feminine in Spanish (e.g. “La abandonada,” “La ansiosa”) **emphasizes** the gendered stakes of wider section title, “Crazy Women”*
Other options: **underscores, highlights**
4. *Helen Keller’s intimate touch interactions with the dances **indicates** and calls attention to other modes of sensing.*
Other options: **points to, exposes, belies**
5. *The long skirts and bonnets in “Appalachian Spring” **bring to mind** a rural American scene.*
Other options: **evoke, recall**
6. *The interview structure of “Women in Translation” **is** a form of opening up dialogue about a problem of representation, rather than merely prescribing a one-size-fits-all solution.*
Other options: **consists of, represents, amounts to**