

ANALYZING INVESTIGATION WRITING – CLAIM AND FOCUS

Preparation

- [Download “Cosmology and Faith”](#)

Purpose

Your students should have already completed their baseline writing activity for the course—Investigation 0. It’s probably safe to say that most students aren’t really dialed in to the genre of historical writing, so before they start to work on their first full Investigation and start banging their heads against their desks, you might want to address the writing process with them directly. Helping students understand what good historical writing looks like, how it’s constructed, and how that relates to their own Investigation writing, will enable them to improve more quickly, give you better papers to grade, and cause parents to love you. Everyone will be happy. So as not to be all talk and no action, there are a series of nine lessons in the course that scaffold and gradually build up student writing skills for improvement throughout the year. We want students to finish the BHP course with some fierce writing skills so that they have the tools they need to start taking over the world. Note that one of these 10 writing activities will show up before each unit’s Investigation; however, your students do not have to complete all the Investigations for you to engage with the writing activities, and we highly recommend you complete all 10, as they are a series and build upon one another.

In this activity, students will revisit the article, “Cosmology and Faith,” from Lesson 1.2, and use the Claim and Focus row in the BHP Writing Rubric to identify the claim and focus in the article. It’s important for students to see examples of these elements of writing so that they begin to understand what we mean by good historical writing.

Practices

Reading, claim testing

Remind students to use the Three Close Reads process when analyzing the student essay from this activity. Additionally, any time students encounter assertions and claims in the course, they should claim test whether those assertions were appropriately supported. Use the language of claim testing in classroom conversation whenever possible. You might even make a game of this by keeping track of how often students can call one another out (and you, too) for making claims without backing them up!

Process

Kick things off by showing students the Oxford Comma illustration included here and in the Investigation 1 download. Once they’ve looked at the illustration, ask them why it’s important to be able to write well.

Once they’ve given some answers, remind them that they’ll be doing a boatload of writing this year. Let them groan, and then tell them the good news—you’re here to help them be better writers for the entire BHP course. So, before diving headfirst into Investigation 1, you’ll familiarize students with the

With the **Oxford Comma**:
We invited the rhinoceri, Washington, and Lincoln.



Without the Oxford Comma:
We invited the rhinoceri, Washington and Lincoln.



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Writing Rubric that will be used for the entire course, and you'll also complete a quick activity with your students so they can get ready for the crazy exciting world of claim and focus. By the end of this activity, your students will be rock stars at identifying claims and how they are supported and developed throughout an essay.

First, take a few minutes to complete a cursory review of the entire BHP Writing Rubric with your students. Make sure they're familiar with each section of the rubric and have a general idea of how each target applies to their writing. Once that review is complete, time to home in on the Claim and Focus section.

Have your students take a look at the first row of the BHP Writing Rubric, Claim and Focus. Then, ask the class the following four questions and tell them to write their answers on their worksheet. Doing this exercise first will fill in any details your students are missing in the Writing Rubric before they go on a hunt for the claim and focus in the article "Cosmology and Faith":

1. What is a claim?
2. What does a claim do in an essay?
3. Why should we care about claims?
4. What is a focused essay?

Now, have students find the thesis/major claim in the article "Cosmology and Faith." Ask them to **circle** the sentence they believe is the major claim. If you want to be kind and give them a hint, you can tell them it shows up very early in the article.

After they've had time to review, find out what students discovered and what they think. If all goes as planned, someone in the class, or better yet, most of the class, picked the first sentence in the article: "Human beings have always wondered how things 'hang together.'" Students may have other ideas about what the major claim is, and that's okay. For now, gather up all the different ideas (add in the actual thesis/claim sentence if no student does), tell them you are going to keep all of those as possible candidates for the claim, and move on to focus. Let students know that once you've teased out the focus of the article, you will return to the claim and make a final decision about it as a class.

So, how do they find the focus? Ask them to look at the article again and see if there are any ideas that seem to be repeated. If there are, students should underline anywhere they see that repetition. Let them know that the ideas might not be exactly the same, but the underlying sentiments will be similar. Then, take a few minutes to review the sentences or phrases students have underlined. They should have picked out phrases or sentences that contain some of the following: "Our minds spontaneously look for connections;" "narrative coherence;" "ties all of nature together." Essentially, the focus of this article is on how things "hang together" or connect, so be sure to point that out to students if it doesn't come up in the class discussion.

Once you've had the opportunity to review what students underlined for the focus, revisit the candidates for the article's claim. At this point, it should be clearer as to why the first sentence of the article, "Human beings have always wondered how things 'hang together,'" is the major claim being made. The rest of the article supports and extends this sentiment repeatedly. If time allows, you can ask students to assign a grade of advanced, proficient, developing, or emerging to the essay, based on the criteria given in the BHP Writing Rubric.

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Directions: Before looking for the claim and focus in the article “Cosmology and Faith,” answer the following four questions and discuss them with your class.

1. What is a claim?

Sample answer: A claim is a thesis statement or assertion that is made in an essay, based on the topic and/or sources from the essay.

2. What does a claim do in an essay?

Sample answer:

- *The thesis statement—the paper’s major claim—clearly sums up what the author thinks about the topic or question; that is, it stakes out a position that addresses the question.*
- *A claim or thesis statement tells the reader what to expect from the paper.*
- *A claim or thesis statement helps structure or organize a paper; the rest of paper should explain, elaborate, or support the thesis statement.*

3. Why should we care about claims?

Sample answer: Without a clear and well-defined claim or thesis statement, it can be hard to understand the main point of a paper and your readers might not walk away with the understanding that you, the author, intended for them to gain. Also, if you don’t write using a clear and well-defined claim or thesis statement, your paper may meander, be unclear, and again, your readers might not walk away understanding your point.

4. What is a focused essay?

Sample answer: A focused essay is one that establishes and consistently maintains the claim/thesis throughout the essay. In other words, it revisits the claim throughout the essay.



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First, think about the following three questions and share your ideas about how to answer them with your classmates:

1. What is a claim?
2. What does a claim do in an essay?
3. Why should we care about claims?
4. What is a focused essay?

Once you've answered these questions, discuss them with your class.

Now, look at the article "Cosmology and Faith" and try to find the thesis/major claim. Once you think you've found THE thesis/claim sentence, circle it – your teacher might ask you which one you circled, so be prepared to explain why you picked the one you did.

Next, look for the focus of the article. How do you do that? See if there are any ideas that seem to appear over and over again. When you find them, underline them! Keep in mind that the ideas might not be exactly the same, but the underlying sentiments will be similar. Once you've done that, you'll review what you've underlined with your class, and then you'll make a final determination about what the major claim/thesis of the article is...and as you've surely figured out by now, the focus of the article is really just the repeated support and extension of the main claim over and over again in a variety of different ways!

