

Rubric Category	Comprehensive Understanding
Grade/Score	Grades 6-12 / Scores 2 and 3
CCSS Writing Standards	W1, W1a
Argument Type	All arguments

# Clear Claims: Refining Your Claim for Specificity

*Students evaluate and improve their claims by reviewing evidence, improving word choices, and adding clarifying phrases.*

## Understanding the Expectations

When you make an argument, you make a claim or take a position. For a claim or position to be interesting and meaningful, it has to be revised and improved from your first attempt. Typically, the first version of your claim is not as insightful and incisive as it could be if you revisit and revise it as you read, think, and write. A truly strong, interesting claim has to be *specific*.

To be *specific*, a claim needs to be composed of words that very precisely fit the situation you are trying to describe. For example, a very vague claim might be something like this: “The main character, Jack, is bad.” In fact, it’s so vague that it’s hardly a claim at all! A more specific—but still fairly vague—claim would be something like this: “The main character, Jack, is unkind.” In this situation, the word “unkind” tells us something a little more precise, a little more narrow, than the word “bad” does.

In addition to choosing more precise words that fit a situation more narrowly, you can further refine and specify a claim by adding phrases that further narrow the situation. We can improve “The main character, Jack, is unkind” by adding a phrase that helps explain the specific way in which he is unkind. For example, we could explain his unkindness a bit by saying “The main character, Jack, is unkind to children who are smaller than he is.” That gives our reader an even smaller category of unkindness to think about and therefore a more specific idea of who this person Jack is, and now we have something that’s much more like a claim than “Jack is bad.” You can even review the evidence to add clarifying details: “The main character, Jack, is unkind to children who are smaller than he is when he thinks no one is watching.”

*When considering ways to make a claim more interesting and specific, you can ask yourself the following questions:*

- What vague words in my claim can I replace with words that are more precise?
- What are some phrases that I might want to add to my claim to help clarify an important part of the idea?
- Are there any words or phrases that don’t add any specificity, and can I remove them to make room for more helpful words and phrases?

## Playing the “Specifying Claims” Game

1. Jot down your claim and then below it write down other possible claims or positions. To come up with this list (short or long), look back in your notes or on any artifacts like paper charts or shared digital documents the class created that might contain alternate positions.
2. Once you have your list, gather together your evidence. If you already have notes, shared digital documents, or paper charts, you can review them. If you are working on a draft of an essay, you can highlight or otherwise gather the evidence you have already incorporated.
3. Create a digital document or work in your notebook and list at least three claims that you want to focus on improving by making them more specific, leaving space (5-10 lines) to write under each option. Write at least one piece of evidence under each of your claims (evidence plays a huge role in developing more specific claims).

4. There are two basic ways to play Specifying Claims:
  - Specific Words:
    - » Look over your claims and choose at least one word in each claim that you think is not as specific as it could be.
    - » Brainstorm a list of other words that mean similar things and write them under your claim and evidence. You can use a thesaurus for ideas, but don't include words if you are not completely sure of their definitions!
    - » Look at your list of words and the piece of evidence you paired with the claim. Do any of those words narrow down your claim, at least a bit? Consider revising your claim with the more specific word.
  - Clarifying Phrases:
    - » Look over your claims and find a place where you can add a clarifying phrase.
    - » Clarifying phrases can start with things like "because" or "in order to," or they can simply be descriptions of people and concepts in your claim.
    - » As you try to come up with good phrases to help refine and specify your claim, look at the evidence you put below the claim. Does it tell you anything specific and unique that you can use to help inspire a good clarifying phrase?
    - » You may have to delete less helpful words and phrases in order to make room for your new phrase, so don't be afraid to cut vague words and phrases in order to replace them with better ones.

Both of these versions of the game are simply variations on the same technique: you are trying to narrow down your language so it applies very precisely to the situation you are trying to describe and not all the other potential situations out there. Don't forget that evidence can be key in helping inspire you to come up with more precise words and phrases to help communicate your ideas.

## Writing It Up

Now, review the improved claims you created during the game. If you are early in the writing process, consider writing a paragraph in which you use one of your newly specified claims. As you write that paragraph and analyze your evidence,

keep an eye out for opportunities to refine your claim even further. It is very common to discover new perspectives when analyzing evidence, so be sure to use what you learn during the writing process to refine and specify your claims even further. If you are working on revising a completed draft, select out one paragraph and revise it by including the new and improved version of a claim and looking for opportunities to refine other parts of the paragraph to be more specific as well. Even if you are revising a completed essay, you should hopefully discover new perspectives that will allow you to rewrite claims, warrants, and analysis to be more specific and insightful.