

Refining Claims

What is refining a claim?

When building a brick house, you need decent bricks, not ones that are irregular or crumble away. Similarly with arguments. Recall that the basic building blocks of arguments are claims. Solid arguments require clear, solid claims.

Unfortunately, often when people present an argument they express their claims poorly. In order to understand what their argument is, or to evaluate it, you may have to take their claims and rework them so they are clear and definite:

To refine a claim is to reformulate it until the claim is as clear and definite as required for argument analysis and evaluation.

How to Refine a Claim

There are many ways claims may need to be improved for the serious critical thinking. Here are seven guidelines for refining claims:

As far as is reasonably possible, ensure that the claim is

1. Declarative – expressed in a declarative sentence
2. Simple – made up of only one claim
3. Literal – not metaphorical
4. Precise – such that only a narrow range of situations would make it true
5. Concise – containing no superfluous words or phrases
6. Unambiguous – containing no problematic ambiguities
7. Emotionally measured – expressed with an appropriate degree of emotional overlay

Note that claims are expressed in sentences. Sometimes refining a claim is really a matter of working on the sentence expressing the claim rather than the claim itself.

Topics in Reasoning

Declarative

Ensure that the claim is expressed in a **well-formed declarative sentence**.

Declarative sentences are the kind we use to make assertions, i.e., to say something true or false.

Example	Claim expressed in a declarative sentence	Point to note
Is breakfast ready? Make some breakfast!	none	Questions and imperatives (orders, instructions) are not declarative; generally they do not assert anything.
Do we want a nuclear rubbish dump next to our crops?	We do not want nuclear waste dumped near our crops.	"Rhetorical" questions express claims, but should be reformulated.
should resign	The Governor General should resign.	Short phrases should be expanded into full declarative sentences.
Crown roast of lamb - modern, American	Crown roast of lamb is a modern American dish.	Ensure the sentence is fully fleshed out.

Topics in Reasoning

Simple

Ensure that the claim is as **simple** as possible.

In this sense,

A simple claim is one which contains only one claim, i.e., only one idea being put forward as true. A compound claim contains multiple distinct claims.

This can be tricky. Some seemingly-compound claims are actually simple, and vice versa:

Example	Simple or compound?	Claim(s) expressed	Point to note
A GST (Goods and Services Tax) is regressive, and it is too burdensome for business.	Compound	A GST is regressive. A GST is too burdensome for business.	Some claims contain multiple distinct claims. "...and..." claims are generally compound.
Elizabeth left because she was embarrassed	Compound	Elizabeth left. Elizabeth was embarrassed. Elizabeth's leaving was caused by her embarrassment.	Some very simple-seeming claims can contain many claims.
If it rains then the game will be cancelled.	Simple	If it rains then the game will be cancelled.	"If...then..." claims are simple. Although they contain two propositions, neither of them is being claimed. Only the connection between them is being claimed.
He is either a liar or a lunatic.	Simple	He is either a liar or a lunatic.	"...or..." claims are also simple. The constituent propositions are not being individually asserted as true.
He is neither a liar nor a lunatic.	Compound	He is not a liar. He is not a lunatic.	"neither...nor..." claims are equivalent to "not..." AND "not..."

Topics in Reasoning

Literal

Strive to make the claim **literal**, i.e., to reduce **metaphor**.

Example

Karl Kruszelnicki lumps all astrologers and astrology into one basket.

More literal

Karl Kruszelnicki treats all astrologers and astrology as if they were the same.

Point to note

The more literal version is less colourful but makes the meaning more definite.

JERUSALEM— The Mideast peace process was once again derailed Monday, when U.S.-brokered talks between Israeli and Palestinian leaders careened off their tracks into an embankment and burst into flames, burning with intensity for nearly an hour until the smoking remains were shoveled over with dirt. [From [The Onion](#)]

JERUSALEM— The Mideast peace process was once again halted Monday, when U.S.-brokered talks between Israeli and Palestinian leaders completely broke down.

Note that it is usually impossible to remove all metaphor. Our language and thinking is deeply metaphorical. Literalness is a matter of degree. The point is to prefer the more literal to the more heavily metaphorical.

Topics in Reasoning

Precise

Ensure that the claim is appropriately **precise**.

A claim is precise if only a narrow range of situations would make it true.

The opposite of precision is **vagueness**.

Note: it is usually not possible or desirable to make a claim completely precise. The level of precision you need depends on the situation.

Example	More precise	Point to note
It is warmish today	The temperature is around 30 degrees Celsius today.	Depending on location, the time of year, and the speaker, any number of temperatures might make the original claim true. The more precise version is still somewhat vague, but less so, and adequate for most purposes.
The Australian Army has never let the Australian people down	The Australian Army has never lost a battle. The Australian Army has always performed well.	When making a claim more precise, you may be forced to choose between a number of alternative interpretations. The alternatives may differ in truth. In this case, the second claim is closer to being true.

Topics in Reasoning

Concise

Ensure that the sentence expressing the claim is as **concise** as possible.

A sentence is concise when it contains no superfluous words or phrases.

For our purposes, a word or phrase is superfluous when it makes no difference to the *argument*. It might add something else (emphasis, stylistic flair, background information, etc.) but if this extra stuff doesn't affect the logic, toss it out!

Example

However you look at it, it is abundantly clear that we have far more to gain by reducing greenhouse gas emissions than we have to lose.
[26 words]

More concise

We would gain far more than we lose by reducing greenhouse gas emissions.
[13 words]

Point to note

The concise form is much shorter. Some nuances in the original have been lost, but it is unlikely these would have made any difference in any argument in which this claim was embedded.

Topics in Reasoning

Unambiguous

Ensure that the sentence expressing the claim has no serious **ambiguities**.

A word, phrase or sentence is unambiguous when, in context, it has only one distinct meaning.

Ambiguity depends a lot on context. The meaning of a sentence is partly a matter of the words and structure of the sentence itself, and partly a matter of the situation in which it is uttered.

Ambiguous claim

Jacques flew to Djibouti.

SARS virus found in tears [newspaper headline]

Less ambiguous claim(s)

Jacques traveled to Djibouti by airplane.

Jacques escaped by going to Djibouti.

Point to note

Ambiguity and vagueness are superficially similar but importantly different. Ambiguity is a matter of multiple distinct meanings, each of which might be quite precise; vagueness is a matter of the meaning (whether one or multiple) allowing the claim to be made true by a wide variety of situations. The sentence "It is 39.45 degrees" is ambiguous (e.g., degrees Celsius or Fahrenheit?) but each of those meanings is quite precise.

Topics in Reasoning

Emotionally Measured

Ensure that the **emotional tone** of the language expressing the claim is **appropriate** to its meaning.

Example	Emotionally measured	Point to note
The company's heinous subterfuges are destroying the worker's livelihoods.	The company's dishonest tactics are reducing the workers' wages.	Excess emotional force should be removed.
Indonesian-backed militias ruthlessly slaughtered thousands of East Timorese.	Same	Sometimes strong emotional force is quite appropriate.
The strikes caused collateral damage among non-combatants.	Civilians were killed and injured in the bombing.	Sometimes emotional force should be added . Euphemisms are phrases used to avoid emotional force; sometimes this is OK but other times it obscures important matters. "Trying to explain the causes of his country's civil wars, John Garang, the southern Sudanese rebel leader, told the UN Security Council last week that there had been a "failure to manage diversity". That is one way of putting it. Another would be to say that the Arab-dominated government in Khartoum has orchestrated mass murder and rape among any ethnic group it suspects of supporting any of the country's rebel movements." The Economist, Nov 25th 2004