

Craft of Research (CoR): Chapter 7 – Making Claims

The 10 salient sentence strings presented below are lifted from the chapter as is, without modification (except, perhaps, for a bit of punctuation here or there). They are presented in order of appearance in the chapter.

1. You need a tentative answer to your research question to focus your search for evidence that will test and support its answer. As you test it, you will likely revise it, but as you assemble your argument, you must understand the kind of claim you are making. You must also be sure that your claim is not just sound, but significant enough to need an argument in the first place.
2. The kind of problem you pose determines the kind of claim you make and the kind of research you need to support it.
3. Don't inflate the importance of a conceptual claim by tacking on a practical action, at least not early in your paper. If you want to suggest a practical application of your conceptual claim, do so in your conclusion. There, you can offer it as an action worth considering without having to develop a case for it.
4. Vague claims lead to vague arguments. The more specific your claim, the more it helps you plan your argument and keep your readers on track as they read it.
5. The final claim should be only as specific as your readers need and should include only those concepts that you develop as themes in your argument.
6. After the specificity of a claim, readers look most closely at its *significance*, a quality they measure by how much it asks them to change what they think. While we can't quantify significance, we can roughly estimate it: *if readers accept a claim, how many other beliefs must they change?* The most significant claims ask a research community to change its deepest beliefs (and it will resist such claims accordingly).
7. Readers value research more highly when it not only offers new data but uses those data to settle what seems puzzling, inconsistent, or otherwise problematic.
8. But you don't have to make big claims to make a useful contribution: small findings can open up new lines of thinking.
9. But nothing damages your ethos more than arrogant certainty. As paradoxical as it seems, you make your argument stronger and more credible by modestly acknowledging its limits. You gain the trust of your readers when you acknowledge and respond to their views, showing that you have not only understood but considered their position.
10. Hedge too much and you seem mealy-mouthed; hedge too little and you can seem overconfident. Unfortunately, the line between the two is thin. So watch how those in your field manage uncertainty and do likewise.