

Coming up with a Central Claim: Three Principles

Let's say you want to write a term paper about the civil rights movement for an American History class. How do you start? There you are, with a blank screen in front of you. You look at it. It stares back at you, blankly.

So you look back at your notes. What have you got? Well, you've read in your textbook about such important figures in the early civil rights movement as Martin Luther King, Fannie Lou Hamer, and Medgar Evers. So, you could do some more research and write a paper about all of these people.

You come up with the following central claim:

[A] "Martin Luther King, Fannie Lou Hamer, and Medgar Evers were all important figures in the early civil rights movement. They helped to liberate African-Americans in the 1950s and 1960s."

But wait a second. How are you going to make all three of these people come alive in a paper? You haven't got room to deal with all of their careers in any kind of thorough way. And besides, so what if they're all "important"? What's interesting about that? Aren't they all important in different ways, and how are you going to list all those ways coherently in such a short amount of space? So now we come to the first principle for starting a paper:

One: You need to have a central claim that is specific.

But first, what **is** a central claim, exactly? It's a short statement that tells your reader the main direction that your argument will take in a paper. It doesn't have to be crammed into a single sentence – you may want to use three or four sentences to say it – and it doesn't necessarily have to appear as the first words of your paper. You will, though, want to get to your central claim at some point on the first page of your paper.

So, how do you go about making your central claim more specific? There are many ways of doing this. One way is by focusing on a **narrow issue** that binds together the material you want to discuss. For example, King, Hamer, and Evers were all involved in Southern voter registration drives. So, you could write a paper that focuses on the subject of voter registration in the early 1960s, and then it will address King, Hamer, and Evers **through** a reading of this larger subject.

Your central claim might look something like this, then:

[B] "The voter registration drives of the early civil rights movement were essential to its success, and three of the leading figures in this movement were Martin Luther King, Fannie Lou Hamer, and Medgar Evers."

This looks nice, and it is certainly more specific than what you started out with, but there are two more problems that remain. First, the central claim is still very broad. So what that they're all "leading" figures! This is just like saying that they're all "important" again. You've

got to come up with something that gets more specific about the **ways** in which they are important. This leads us to the second principle for central claim-writing:

Two: Your central claim should be divisible into parts

In other words, in order to get as specific as possible in your central claim writing, it's a good idea to produce a central claim that can be broken up into sections that will roughly describe the sections of your argument. This principle applies especially in papers that are medium-sized or long, but even short essays can have theses that go beyond a single statement.

In the example we're using, you'll want to come up with a central claim statement that tells your reader how these three historical figures **differently** contributed to the early civil rights registration movement. When you look back at your notes, you discover that King worked broadly, attempting to register African-Americans by moving from city to city, and by so doing he quickly received national recognition. But Evers and Hamer worked more locally at first, attempting to integrate small parts of the most racist, intransigent areas of the deep south, including Mississippi. So you've got a distinction in hand: Evers and Hamer worked more at the grassroots level, and with smaller groups of people. So, your central claim could look like this:

[C] "While Martin Luther King's voter registration movement worked on a city-by-city approach, gathering national attention, such civil rights leaders as Fannie Lou Hamer and Medgar Evers worked more locally, and in the most dangerous areas of the deep south for African-Americans. By **comparing the methods** of King with those of Hamer and Evers, we can observe the very **different** sorts of challenges which faced organizers in the early civil rights movement."

Now you've got something more concise, and your central claim seeks to **make sense** of the differences among these three figures. It doesn't just say **that** they are different; it also tells us why this difference may be **significant** for our understanding of the early civil rights movement as a whole. It still doesn't establish distinctions between Hamer and Evers, but your paper could come to distinguish them by the end.

So, another thing a central claim does is **draw distinctions** or **make comparisons** among different issues or events. It seeks to do more than just tell us how some things are like each other – it also tells us how we can understand what distinguishes them, and why we should care.

Finally, and perhaps this is most obvious, the third principle for central claim-writing is:

Three: Your central claim should be arguable

Look back at central claim **[A]**, about the "importance" of the three civil-rights figures. No rational individual with an understanding of history could argue with the proposition that King, Hamer, and Evers were important to the movement, so it's not a particularly interesting central claim. It's like saying, "*Moby Dick* is a book about a whale." Okay, sure, but so what?

Now look at central claim **[C]**: someone could indeed argue with this position. One could say that King was in some senses a local organizer, that he, too, faced the most racist individuals, and that his challenges were just as threatening and specific as any that Hamer or Evers faced. So, the position taken up in central claim **[C]** is **arguable**. Reasonable people could disagree with it, and the strength of your paper depends not on your being absolutely right, but on the way you use your evidence and shape your argument to support your position. The strongest argumentative essays are ones that provide central claim statements and developed arguments which are challenging and seek to pull your reader onto your side of a debate.