

## 1.3 ASSERTIONS

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### Learning Objectives

- ❖ Understand why a basic statement is sometimes referred to as an assertion.
- ❖ Move beyond that everyday interpretation and treat an assertion as a special type of statement.
- ❖ Use the core characteristics of an assertion to locate it in a segment of text.
- ❖ Think of an assertion as a claim made by an author
- ❖ Recognize the importance of providing support for claims.
- ❖ Locate details in the text that are intended to support claims.



**Figure 1.8 – Example of an Assertion**

(Study: Church Goers Have Better Health, Longer Life Expectancy And Less Stress, Caribbean 360, June 7, 2017)

As you begin to focus on the assertion, I want you to throw your mind back to our earlier explanation of a statement. We said then that a statement presents information with the intention that those to whom the information is directed must accept it as directed. We went further to say that a statement is expressed with confidence and conviction.

What we did not mention at the time is that in some circles, the term '*statement*' is seen as having the same meaning as '*assertion*'. In the academic community, one would not normally treat the term '*assertion*' as a synonym for '*statement*'. One is more likely to view it as a special type of statement, that stands out in its own right. That view of '*assertion*' as a special type of statement is evident in such definitions as a *confident and forceful statement*, and a *positive statement or declaration often without support or reason*, as well as a *positive statement, usually made without evidence*.

## Assertions as claims

One thing that stands out in these definitions is that an assertion does not need to be substantiated by evidence. We see this approach to its use in casual, informal exchanges and in particular in the oral presentations of public speakers.

Most writers of academic texts do not share that view. As such, you will often see members of the academic community refer to an assertion as a **claim**. Even though the statement was forcibly and emphatically made, its only authority lies in the person (or persons) who expressed it in the first place. It is that person's assertion. In other words, it is a claim advanced by that individual and cannot and should not be widely accepted unless that individual provides evidence to support his/her claim. As someone studying academic texts, you are strongly advised to think of assertions as claims and to ensure that you see evidence within the text to support the author's claims.

### Examples of assertions (or claims)

- i. *Claire Handscombe has a commitment problem online.*
- ii. *Communication influences your thinking about yourself and others.*
- iii. *Communication influences how you learn.*

All three conform to the definitions of an assertion provided earlier. However, as we emphasized then, authors have a responsibility to substantiate the claims they make by providing appropriate relevant details, to establish that the claims are valid and as such, may be accepted.

As readers, you have the right to contest all claims; to question whether they are valid; whether they are well-grounded and based on solid reasoning. Of course, as the reader, you may still not be convinced, but the author would have done what he/she was supposed to do.

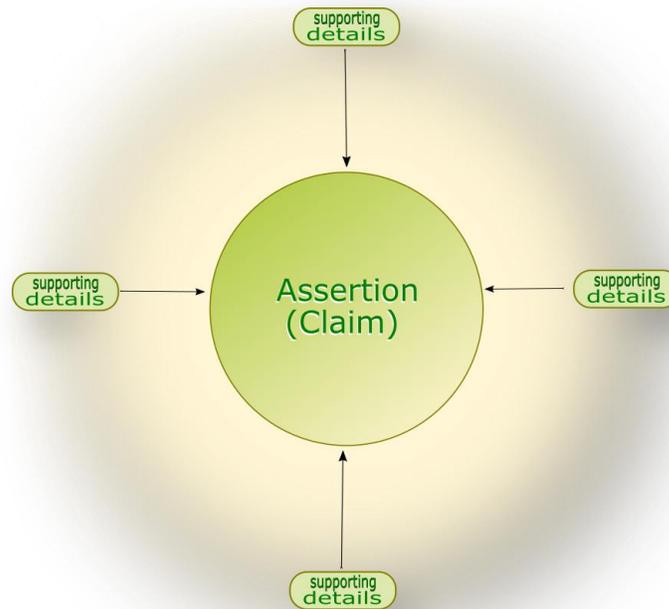


Figure 1.9 - Assertion and supporting claims

Let's see how the author provides support for the first assertion in the list above:

**Extract 1.13**

Claire Handscombe has a commitment problem online. Like a lot of Websurfers, she clicks on links posted on social networks, reads a few sentences, looks for exciting words, and then grows restless, scampering off to the next page she probably won't commit to.

Based on what he has observed about Claire Handscombe's online behaviour, this author has come to the conclusion that she has an online commitment problem. Here is the assertion again, with the supporting details organized as a list:

**Claire Handscombe has a commitment problem online.**

- i. *She clicks on links posted on social networks.*
- ii. *(She) reads a few sentences.*
- iii. *(She) looks for exciting words.*
- iv. *(She) grows restless, scampering off to the next page she probably won't commit to.*

When we look at the supporting details in relation to the assertion, we can easily see how the author can make such a claim.

Now let us look at the second with its supporting details:

**Extract 1.14**

*Communication influences your thinking about yourself and others.*

We all share a fundamental drive to communicate. Communication can be defined as the process of understanding and sharing meaning ... You share meaning in what you say and how you say it, both in oral and written forms. If you could not communicate, what would life be like? A series of never-ending frustrations? Not being able to ask for what you need or even to understand the needs of others?

Being unable to communicate might even mean losing a part of yourself, for you communicate your self-concept - what we perceive ourselves to be.—your sense of self and awareness of who you are—in many ways.

Let's examine these details step-by-step. The first sentence in the paragraph that follows the sub-head is another assertion. Then there is a definition, followed by an expansion of the definition. The rest of the extract draws the readers' attention to problems that could arise in our everyday lives if we were unable to communicate, for example a loss of awareness of self. All these elements taken together serve as support for the initial claim, that communication influences your thinking about yourself and others.

Do you notice any difference between the supporting details for this latter assertion and those associated with the claim about Claire Handscombe's online behaviour?

## Examining the support for claims

Look more closely at the details to support the first assertion. The author, based on his observation of Claire's online behaviour, is able to provide evidence to back up his claim. In general, evidence to support assertions may be derived from observation (as in this case), experience, one's own prior knowledge, or relevant information obtained from other sources, whether oral or written and conveyed through any medium. The aim is to provide evidence that the assertion is valid and should be accepted.

The nature of the support provided in our second example is different from that of the first. It is not based solely on direct observation. The combination of an added assertion, a definition, extended explanation of the definition, and reference to likely real-life problems takes the act of providing support details to another level.

At this level, the author delves into the claim itself to unearth and make visible elements which, in his view, constitute its core meaning. This approach to identifying supporting details entails **an analysis** of the claim. We will look more closely at this type of support when we study how authors conduct analysis in Unit 2.

As a reader, once you have identified a segment of text as an assertion, and you are looking for details to support it, you need to be constantly going back and forth between the assertion (claim) and the supporting details to verify the connection between them.

Two additional points about assertions. First, most of the time, this type of statement is the first sentence in a paragraph, with the follow-up sentences supporting it. While this is the typical format, it is not the only one. Sometimes assertions may come at the end of a paragraph. Whether they appear at the beginning or at the end of a paragraph, or anywhere else in a segment of text, all claims must be substantiated with relevant supporting details.

Secondly, you will find that researchers often use assertions when they draw conclusions from the findings of the studies they conduct. The claim that features in Figure 1.8 is an example of this. According to the online newspaper that reported on it (and used it as the headline for the article), this claim regarding the quality of life of churchgoers emerged out of a study conducted by researchers at Vanderbilt University, Nashville, USA.

Claims emerging out of a research study must be subject to a higher standard before they may be accepted. As a reader you need to examine the various aspects of the study itself, inclusive of its design, methodology, data collection procedures and analysis, in order to satisfy yourself that the claim is a valid one.

### Key Takeaways

- ❖ In academic texts assertions are treated as a special type of statement.
- ❖ In everyday usage assertions are usually unsubstantiated.
- ❖ In academic texts assertions are treated as claims that must be substantiated.
- ❖ Readers must look elsewhere in the text to locate the details that provide support for an assertion.
- ❖ Assertions used to draw conclusions in a research study, must be subject to a higher standard of examination.

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