Columbia University Writing Center

Workshop: Developing Claims

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Why are claims important?

Substantive Answer:

Because a claim helps explain or resolve an Interpretive Problem.

Because claims are the way that academics advance theories and create knowledge.

Practical Answer:

Because you may be required to make claim(s) in your University Writing and other academic essays.

What are "claims"?

In academic parlance, a **claim** is an argument, thesis, or hypothesis.

In Progression 1 of University Writing, a claim usually grows out of an **interpretive problem** ("IP") that the student/writer identifies in *another* text.

And an IP, in turn, grows out of **observation(s)** that the student/writer makes about a text. Note: an observation is something that is demonstrably true, meaning that it is *not* subject to debate. For example, a student/writer might observe that the author of the text (sometimes called the "**interlocutor**") selectively capitalizes a certain word or shifts from the "third person" **point of view** in a particular passage.

How does a writer develop a claim?

Developing an initial claim is typically a **3-step process**:

Step 1: Close Reading

First, the writer needs to perform a **"close reading"** the text, looking for potentially "fruitful" **observations**.

Fruitful observations are things that you notice (tensions, inconsistencies, unexpected statements, odd word choices, pattern breaks, etc.) that might give rise to an **interpretive problem.**

For example, does one passage appear to be inconsistent with another passage? Does one passage appear to contradict the author's *purported* message? (If so, then the "**form**" appears to contradict the "**function**.")

Note: Sue Mendelsohn's handout entitled "**Nine Strategies to Read for Interpretive Problems**" may be helpful during the close reading stage.

How does a writer develop a claim?

(cont.)

Step 2: Identify Interpretive Problem(s)

Using your **observations** from the text, identify at least one **interpretive problem.**

For example, you might note that although the author/interlocutor purports to dislike X in one passage, he seems to advocate for X in another passage. This apparent inconsistency between two parts of the essay is an **interpretive problem.** Or you might find that one passage of the text violates your expectations. That tension between expectation and experience can also be an **interpretive problem.** There are myriad ways to identify an interpretive problem.

Note: Sue Mendelsohn's handout entitled "**Nine Ways to Generate Interpretive Problems**" may be helpful during the close reading stage.

Nine Ways to Generate an Interpretive Problem

[from Sue Mendelsohn's Handout: "9 Ways to Generate Interpretive Problems"]

- element/whole   How can we reconcile one element of the text with the whole text?
- element/element   How can we reconcile these two seemingly contradictory elements?
- pattern/pattern break   How can we reconcile the way the text establishes a pattern & then breaks it?
- function/form   How can we reconcile the tensions between the purpose of a text & the form it takes?
- presence/absence   How might we fill the absence that the text creates?
- expectation/observation   How can we reconcile our expectation w/what we actually perceive in the text?
- audience/text   How can we reconcile the tension bet. the intended audience's interest and what the text does?
- convention/observation   How can we reconcile the dissonances between the genre convention and what we actually observe?
- context/text   How can we reconcile the dissonances between the text and the context in which it was produced or sit

- Although it appears that _____ conflicts with _____, in fact _____. [Part and Part]

- While the text seems to assert that _____, the formal choice to _____ complicates the w we understand that assertion. [Form and Function]

- Given the presence of _____, the surprising absence of _____ suggests that we must rethin _____. [Presence and Absence]

[from *How Scholars Write*, by Aaron Ritzenberg and Sue Mendelsohn, Oxford Univ. Press 2021]

Let's Look at the IP in a *Morningside Review* Essay

The Definitively Non-Standard English of David Foster Wallace

by Jack Klempay

In his essay "Tense Present," David Foster Wallace claims that Bryan Garner's A Dictionary of Modern American Usage is effective because Garner effaces his individuality from the argument: upon finishing ADMAU, the reader has no idea whether Garner is "black or white, gay or straight, Democrat or Dittohead" (57). To Wallace, Garner's ethical appeal derives from the fact that he does not seem to exist at all, and he doesn't let his personality get in the way of his argument. But while Wallace claims that Garner is a "genius" (57), he deliberately departs from Garner's anonymous writing style. In fact, Wallace flaunts his authorial voice, and by the end of the essay the reader is well acquainted with the author. This begs the question: if Wallace so admires Garner's impersonal approach, why does he appeal to his reader with such different rhetoric?

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Embodying Blackness:
Vocabulary of Race in Coates's "Letter to My Son"   by Shannon Sun

Let's look at the IP in another *Morningside Review* Essay

from *The Morningside Review:*

https://journals.library.columbia.edu/
index.php/TMR/article/view/3454

In his essay, "Letter to My Son," Ta-Nehisi Coates reflects on the visceral, crippling nature of racism, arguing that the systemic abuse of black bodies is deeply entrenched in America's history. In articulating this claim, Coates speaks of "white America's progress," but he immediately refines the phrase with the qualification "or rather the progress of those Americans who believe that they are white" (2). By doing so, Coates creates a subtle distinction, differentiating "white" as a racial category from "white" as an acquired ideology of distinct groups. He posits that race is not a natural, biological grouping, arguing instead that it is a political mechanism built upon the "pillaging of life, liberty, labor, and land" (3). The immediate self-correction serves as a rhetorical cue, drawing attention to Coates's underlying project.

Careful scrutiny, however, reveals that Coates—although repeatedly invoking "the belief," "the dream," and "the religion" of being white—never once defines blackness as an abstract ideological concept. Instead, he does the opposite, making concrete the visceral violence that destructs "black bodies," cataloging the ways in which racism "dislodges brains, blocks airways, rips muscle, extracts organs, cracks bones, breaks teeth" (5). Coates's different treatment of being black and "the belief in being white," therefore, creates an apparent inconsistency. Why is it, then, that Coates chooses to approach whiteness as an abstract construct but blackness as literal, embodied and thus inseparable from the physical realm?

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Focused Freewrite

Write out your current Interpretive Problem. Be sure to briefly describe the observation(s) that give rise to the problem.

Note:
If you have not yet articulated an Interpretive Problem, then make a list of the observations that you have that might give rise to an IP. Now re-read those observations using Sue Mendelsohn's Handout "9 Ways to Generate Interpretive Problems."

How does a writer develop a claim?

(cont.)

Step 3: Brainstorm to Develop a Claim

Now that you've used your **observations** to articulate an **interpretive problem**, you are ready for the next step: brainstorming about the Interpretive Problem to develop a **claim**…

How can you explain or resolve the Interpretive Problem? What are the consequences of the IP? For example:
- Does the IP force you to rethink the author/interlocutor's underlying beliefs?
- Does the IP make you realize something new about the author/interlocutor's text or argument?
- Does the IP change your understanding of the author/interlocutor's actual project or intended audience?

Note: These are just a few examples. The goal is to come up with a theory or hypothesis (a "**claim**"!) to make sense of the IP.

Sample Claim Templates

Here are a few templates to help you think about academic claims that grow out of interpretive problems:

- Because _____ is in tension with the entire text, we must reconsider _____. [Whole and Part]

- Although it appears that _____ conflicts with _____, in fact _____. [Part and Part]

- While the text seems to assert that _____, the formal choice to _____ complicates the way we understand that assertion. [Form and Function]

- Given the presence of _____, the surprising absence of _____ suggests that we must rethink _____. [Presence and Absence]
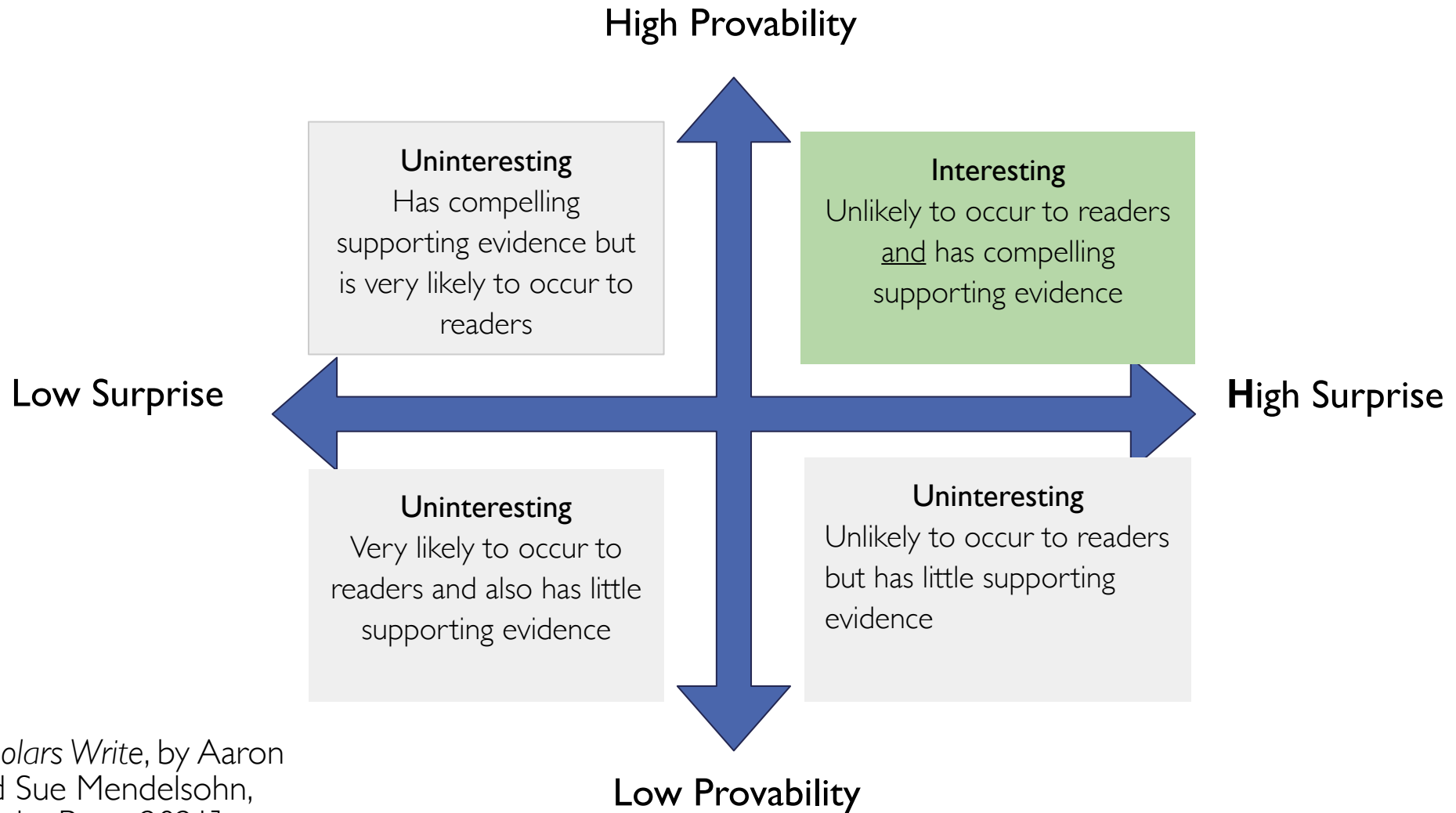
Avoid 4 Common Pitfalls

Confusing "criticism" with "critical inquiry." Be careful not to mistake *disagreement* or *opinion* for a claim. You might disagree with an author/ interlocutor's substantive argument or conclusion, but that is not a "claim" for the purposes of UW.

Pursuing Uninteresting Claims: Be careful not to pursue a claim that is obvious or likely to occur to readers. For e.g. , a claim that an author switches to the first-person plural (*i.e.,*" we") <u>to engage an audience</u> is already a well-known rhetorical move (politicians do it all the time!). If you stop there, you are not telling the reader anything new. On the other hand, if you claim that the switch reveals something else about the author's assumptions, your claim is potentially interesting.

Pursuing Unprovable Claims: Be careful not to pursue a claim that is not provable. You cannot know, for e.g., an author's true motive.

Failure to "Complexify." Be careful not to *simply* amass evidence from the text to support your claim. Complex essays go further: they don't settle for one answer. Instead, the author tests their claim (we call this "**destabilizing**") and rethinks things and sometimes poses alternative claims.

Your goal is to develop an "interesting" claim:

High Provability

Uninteresting
Has compelling supporting evidence but is very likely to occur to readers

Interesting
Unlikely to occur to readers and has compelling supporting evidence

Low Surprise

High Surprise

Uninteresting
Very likely to occur to readers and also has little supporting evidence

Uninteresting
Unlikely to occur to readers but has little supporting evidence
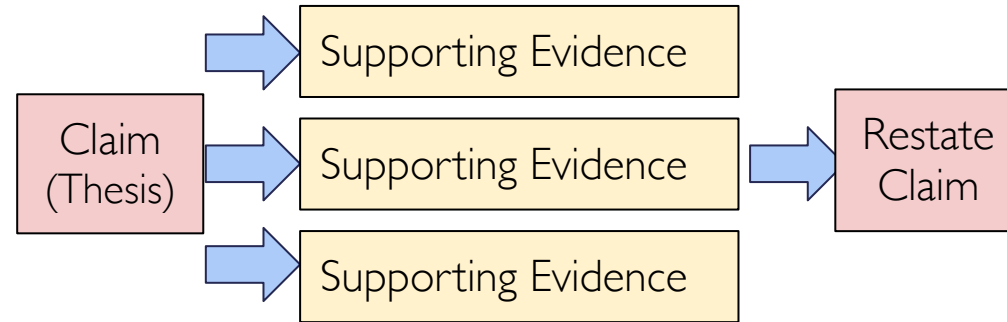
Low Provability

[from *How Scholars Write*, by Aaron Ritzenberg and Sue Mendelsohn, Oxford University Press 2021]

Simple v. Complex Claims

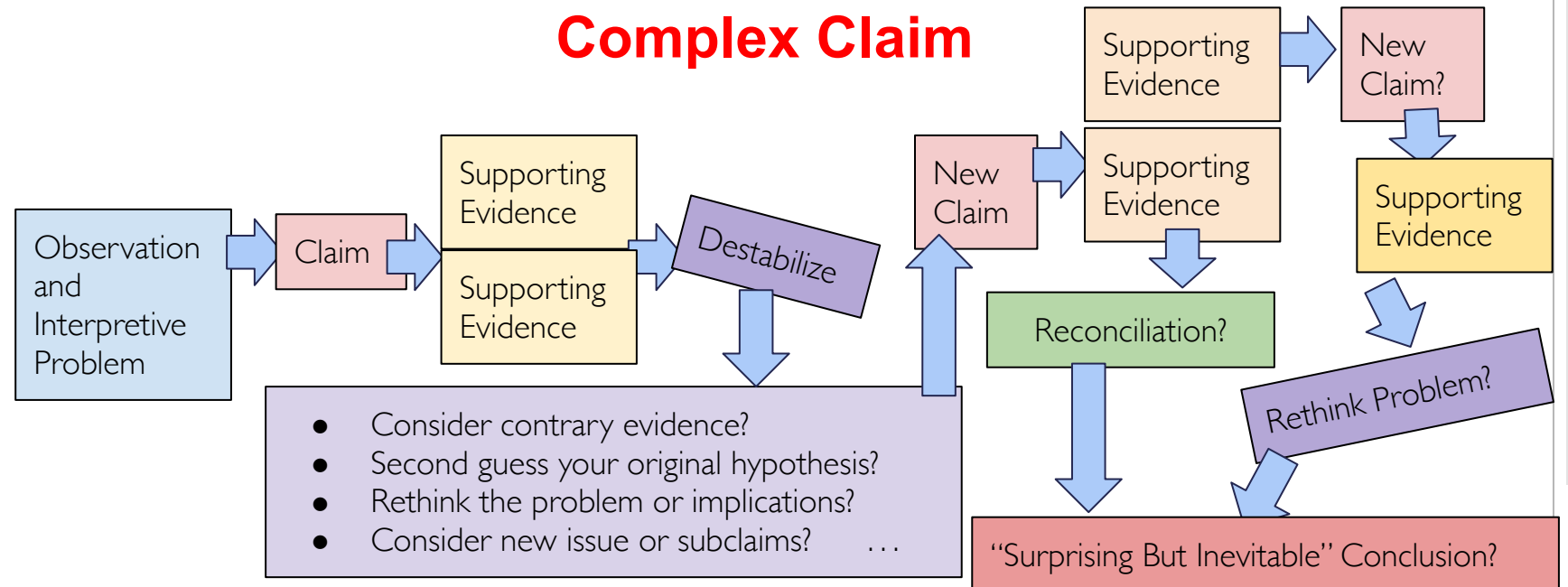[adapted from *How Scholars Write*, by Aaron Ritzenberg and Sue Mendelsohn, Oxford Univ. Press 2021]

Simple Claim

Claim (Thesis) → Supporting Evidence

Claim (Thesis) → Supporting Evidence → Restate Claim

Claim (Thesis) → Supporting Evidence

- Essay begins and ends in same place
- Structure results in "confirmation bias"
- Resembles the classic 5-par. essay

Complex Claim

Observation and Interpretive Problem → Claim → Supporting Evidence / Supporting Evidence → Destabilize →

- Consider contrary evidence?
- Second guess your original hypothesis?
- Rethink the problem or implications?
- Consider new issue or subclaims?   …

→ New Claim → Supporting Evidence / Supporting Evidence → Supporting Evidence → New Claim? → Supporting Evidence → Rethink Problem?

Reconciliation?

"Surprising But Inevitable" Conclusion?

Let's look at a Claim in a *Morningside Review* Essay

Embodying Blackness:
Vocabulary of Race in Coates's "Letter to My Son" by Shannon Sun

[after introducing the Interpretive Problem]

In other words, [Coates] cannot choose to subscribe to "the belief" of being black, in the same way that his white counterparts may indulge in the assurance of being white, because, after all, in a country where even police departments have been "endowed with the authority to destroy [his] body," whiteness promises power while blackness represents its very deprivation (4). The implicit invocation of "body," therefore, reduces Coates's experience with race to a raw, unarmored state subjected to the violent consequences of simply embodying blackness. It is no wonder, then, that Coates makes a distinction between being black and "the belief in being white," as it emphasizes that the former is robbed of agency as soon as their white counterparts indulge in the institutionalized belief system committed to the shackling of black bodies (3).

However, the very distinction that compels Coates to make his initial shift from "white America" to "those Americans who believe that they are white" has an arguably divisive effect (2). How does Coates's selection of race-related vocabulary advance or undermine his project to respond to the "constant, generational, ongoing battery and assault" of systemic racism (5)?

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A Quick Review

Start Here

7. Writer Concludes the Essay, ideally in a "Surprising but Inevitable Way"
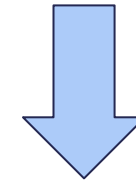
6. Writer "Returns to the Text" <u>again</u> for "Evidence" to Support the New Claim
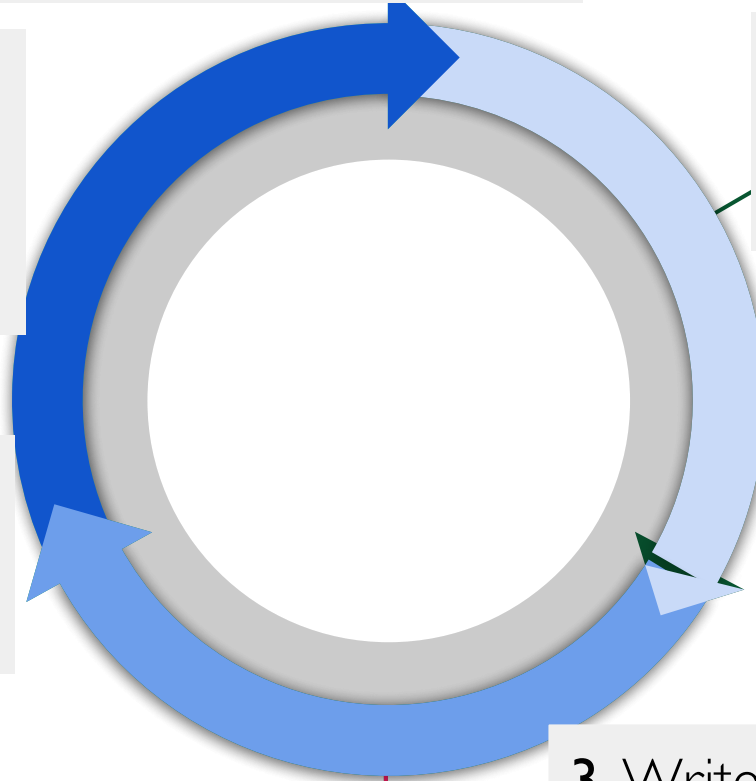
5. Writer "Complexifies" the Claim by Rethinking the Claim, Making New Claims, etc.

4. Writer "Returns to the Text" for "Evidence" to Support the Claim

1. Writer Performs "Close Reading(s)" to Produce Fruitful "Observations"

2. Writer Uses "Observations" to Identify an "Interpretive Problem"

3. Writer Develops "Claim" to Help Explain or Make Sense of the "Interpretive Problem"

Focused Freewrite

Write out your current claim. If you have not yet articulated a claim, then spend the time brainstorming your IP and about possible claims.

Now think about how you might make your claim more complex.
- Is there evidence from the text that contradicts your theory?
- Does your theory suggest a new understanding of *another* part of the text?

There are lots of ways to make claims more "**complex**." The main point is that you need to go deeper. Don't stop with one idea. Jot down any ideas that you have and then "**return to the text**" to see if you can find supporting "**evidence**" for this new idea….

Hint: This process almost always involves *another* close reading of the text.

Still have Questions?

- Ask your questions now!
- Schedule a conference with your professor
- Schedule an appointment at the Writing Center: https://www.college.columbia.edu/core/uwp/writing-center
- Check out other resources:
  - *How Scholars Write* (Ritzenberg and Mendelsohn)
  - *The Craft of Research* (Booth, Colomb, and Williams)
  - *The Elements of Reasoning* (Corbett and Eberly)
  - *They Say, I Say* (Graff and Birkenstein)
  - *Rewriting: How to Do Things with Texts* (Harris)
  - *Writing Analytically* (Rosenwasser and Stephen)
  - *Style: Lessons in Clarity and Grace* (Williams)

Please complete the WC Survey: https://columbia.mywconline.net/survey.php