

Elusive pursuits: Hunting normative claims

The Milton Hand cycle might look easy to generate, but many falter at Step 1. To get the Milton Hand started we need a normative claim: a claim about what ought to be done (in other words, a claim which makes use of a modal operator of requirement - we'll leave aside now modal operators of possibility for now, because we want you to flex your assertiveness muscles when making claims about the value of your work!). Generating a normative claim is not as easy as it seems. In fact, most first drafts of texts don't contain any normative claims – or they only contain implicit claims, which lay dormant like seeds under the topsoil of the text.

When editing your own and others' texts, your task will be archeological: excavating subterranean claims to importance; hearing what is only hinted at; and then nurturing that treasured seed of significance into a blooming flower, for all to see. So how precisely will you need to approach your task?

Instructions:

1. Choose a text to work with. Carefully read through the text, and mark (underline) any modal operators you can find (requirement words such as “should, must, need to, ought to”, or possibility words such as “may, could, want to, might, can”, and so on). If any of these are present, you may have an explicit normative claim in the text.
2. If no modal operators can be found, ask yourself which parts of the text hint at the value of the work, or imply that something should be done (please underline these passages also).
3. Write up/explicate as many potential normative claims (Milton Hand Step 1 sentences) as you can find.

More often than not, there will be no explicit normative claims in a text. The task is then to identify those passages that implicitly communicate a value of the research, and that could be re-written into explicit normative statements.

Consider these examples:

- “Children left alone in cars may suffer from heat stress.”
- “Elderly people’s mental health has been found to benefit from pet ownership.”
- “A study on yellow peppers does not exist but would greatly aid society.”



While these sentences do not contain explicit claims to importance or calls to action, we can easily reframe them into explicit normative claims:

- “We must not leave children alone in cars.” (Or: “Children must not be left alone in cars.”)
- “Elderly people should own pets.”
- “We need to study yellow peppers.”

Alternative claims could be generated – the above are merely suggestions based on the interpretations of one reader. Note also how “simple” some of these claims are: they are stripped down premises; some might be too simple to warrant stating explicitly (although surprisingly often we find clients arguing passionately yet implicitly in their defence).

In the end, there will have to be choice: which normative claim will be the hook to hang the text on? What is the standout claim of this paper? This will determine where the article or text will put its focus. Other normative claims may be covered in different articles in the future.

Once you settle on the best normative claims that encapsulate the heart of the project or work in question, you can begin exploring the benefits and disadvantages (carrots and sticks) by cycling through the Milton Hand.