The Art of Metacommentary

TEMPLATES FOR INTRODUCING METACOMMENTARY

TO WARD OFF POTENTIAL MISUNDERSTANDINGS

The following moves help you differentiate certain views from ones they might be mistaken for.

▶ Essentially, I am arguing not that we should give up the policy, but that we should monitor effects far more closely.
▶ This is not to say ____, but rather ____.
▶ X is concerned less with ____ than with ____.

TO ALERT READERS TO AN ELABORATION OF A PREVIOUS IDEA

The following moves elaborate on a previous point, saying to readers: “In case you didn’t get it the first time, I’ll try saying the same thing in a different way.”

▶ In other words, ____.
▶ To put it another way, ____.
▶ What X is saying here is that ____.

TO PROVIDE READERS WITH A ROADMAP TO YOUR TEXT

This move orients readers, clarifying where you have been and where you are going—and making it easier for them to process and follow your text.

▶ Chapter 2 explores ____ , while chapter 3 examines ____.
▶ Having just argued that ____, I want now to complicate the point by ____.
TO MOVE FROM A GENERAL CLAIM TO A SPECIFIC EXAMPLE

These moves help you explain a general point by providing a concrete example that illustrates what you’re saying.

- For example,
- . . . . , for instance, demonstrates
- Consider . . . , for example.
- To take a case in point, . . . .

TO INDICATE THAT A CLAIM IS MORE, LESS, OR EQUALLY IMPORTANT

The following templates help you give relative emphasis to the claim that you are introducing, showing whether that claim is of more or less weight than the previous one, or equal to it.

- Even more important,
- But above all,
- Incidentally, we will briefly note,
- Just as important,
- Equally,
- Finally,

TO EXPLAIN A CLAIM WHEN YOU ANTICIPATE OBJECTIONS

Here’s a template to help you anticipate and respond to possible objections.

- Although some readers may object that . . . . , I would answer that . . . .
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TO GUIDE READERS TO YOUR MOST GENERAL POINT

These moves show that you are wrapping things up and tying up various subpoints previously made.

- In sum, then,
- My conclusion, then, is that
- In short,

In this chapter we have tried to show that the most persuasive writing often doubles back and comments on its own claims in ways that help readers negotiate and process them. Instead of simply piling claim upon claim, effective writers are constantly “stage managing” how their claims will be received. It's true of course that to be persuasive a text has to have strong claims to argue in the first place. But even the strongest arguments will flounder unless writers use metacommentary to prevent potential misreadings and make their arguments shine.

Exercises

1. Read an essay or article and annotate it to indicate the different ways the author uses metacommentary. Use the templates on pp. 135–37 as your guide. For example, you may want to circle transitional phrases and write “trans” in the margins, to put brackets around sentences that elaborate on earlier sentences and mark them “elab,” or underline sentences in which the author sums up what he or she has been saying, writing “sum” in the margins.

   How does the author use metacommentary? Does the author follow any of the templates provided in this book?