

What a Thesis Does

Responding to a significant question at issue presents a writer with certain responsibilities: to be sure that sufficient reasons exist for believing an idea and to be sure that those reasons can be understood by others. These responsibilities are present throughout the writing process. They begin when one thinks about composing a thesis.

A thesis is an idea, stated as an assertion, that represents a reasoned response to a question at issue and that serves as the central idea of a composition.

Each of the terms of this definition has special significance for the process of composing a good argumentative essay.

A thesis is an idea. . . . Some people use the word *idea* to mean something like topic or subject, phrases that indicate an *area* of potential interest, such as "economics" or a "cure for cancer" or "my first encounter with Professor Smith." These phrases might be said to be broad or narrow subjects, but they are not yet ideas because they do not say anything *about* economics or *about* a cancer cure or *about* the first time I met Smith. Perhaps you have had a teacher who was fond of telling you to narrow your subject. Such advice misses the point, unless that teacher also pushed you to come up with an idea by saying something about your subject. The noun *economics* is not an idea. The narrowed (or focused) noun phrase "economic conditions in South Africa in 1875" is still not an idea. "Economics is bull" is an idea—although, of course, not a very good one. The difference between noun phrases that are not ideas and statements that are ideas lies in the verb. Ideas are sentences; they complete a thought by connecting a verb to the noun phrase. Any noun phrase, no matter how broad or narrow, might become the basis of many ideas, even totally contradictory or incompatible ones. "Economics is my best class" is a very different idea from "Economics is bull," and yet both apparently share the same subject.

A thesis is . . . stated as an assertion. Not all ideas are stated with the intention of asserting something. Even though an idea must be a complete sentence, not all sentences are uttered for the purpose of asserting a proposition. "Go away" is certainly a sentence that communicates, but it does not seem to be proposing anything as true. It expresses a desire but does not put forth a claim. "I guess I'll take a walk." "What a day for baseball!" "Please tell me how to get to the geology building." "Gimme a break!" Sentences, ideas, can perform many other actions besides asserting.

To assert is to claim that some condition is the case. Each of the nonassertions above could be made into assertions by making them into such claims. "A walk would be good for me right now." "Sunny days are best for baseball." "Geology is to the left of Art." Assertions propose ideas to which one might

respond, "No, that's not the case," or "Yes, that is the case." As you can see, making assertions implies that one believes in what one has just said. To seem to assert without belief would be a different kind of action: to lie or to joke. Assertions imply a willingness to defend an idea against the possibility that it might not be the case.

A thesis . . . represents a reasoned response to a question at issue. An assertion is worth writing about when not everyone already believes it and when people should care whether to believe it or not. A thesis answers a question, in other words, that people are really asking because they do not already share the answer. As we saw previously, all assertions answer a stasis question of some kind. Not all assertions answer a question at issue. Consider these assertions and the questions to which they are answers:

- It's raining. Is it raining?
- Today is election day. Is today election day?
- You should vote "no" on Measure 6. Should I vote "yes" or "no" on Measure 6?
- Measure 6 will violate your constitutional right to own a handgun. Will Measure 6 violate my constitutional right to own a handgun?
- The Constitution does not make handgun ownership a right. Does the Constitution make handgun ownership a right?

Are the questions to which these assertions respond *at issue*? You're right if you answer "it depends." It depends on who is asking them and why. It depends on the context in which the question is asked. A thesis is a response to a *situation*, which includes a community of people who, for their own reasons, are addressing certain questions. There are situations in which these questions might constitute questions at issue, and there are other situations in which they would not. The difference is whether the answer calls for argumentation. Is there doubt whether the answer should be believed? If I assert that "it's raining" in a situation where the question is not at issue—where no one cares whether it's raining or not or where everyone is satisfied by my mere assertion—then there is no issue to be argued. If I assert that "today is election day" in a situation where everyone already knows it, then there is no issue. In this case, however, the question at issue might become, "What, then, should we do about it?" and argument might ensue over whether it's worth going out in the rain to vote. Then again, it might not, if that question is not at issue. If I am talking to some friends who have already decided to vote against Measure 6, then my statement "You should vote 'no' on Measure 6" would not be at issue, although my statement "Measure 6 will violate your constitutional right to own a handgun" might be at issue if those friends were divided on *why* Measure 6 should be defeated. If I were addressing an audience of uncommitted voters, my assertion "Measure 6 will violate your constitutional right to own a

handgun" might address a question at issue. But if that audience happened to believe that the Constitution does not provide citizens with such a right, then I would have missed them with my arguments because I chose to address the wrong question. I would have to back up and address the question of whether there is, in fact, such a right. Only by finding the question at issue and arguing for an assertion that answers it do I find my audience.

The judgment of whether you have focused on such a question must be made by thinking about your audience. What do they already believe? What answers do they share with you? On what issue are you divided? To what assertions of yours will they say, "Yes, but . . ."? Such questions help you decide whether to argue this assertion or that one, and the decision can change from situation to situation, from audience to audience.

As a reasoned response to a question at issue, a thesis cannot be taken for granted. It is determined by a process of inquiry into the question. A stance that does not emerge from inquiry is sometimes called a knee-jerk response to indicate that it is formed as a reaction without thinking. Keeping a critical reader in mind is one way to be sure you give a thesis adequate consideration before asserting it unequivocally. And then you may find that a qualified assertion is better than an unqualified one.

A thesis . . . will serve as the central idea of a composition. This final part of the definition points us forward, toward the process of development by which a thesis becomes an essay. The last two parts of the definition, one pointing backward and one pointing forward, suggest that a thesis has two functions that stand at the center of your thinking about what you will write. It represents the result of a process of inquiry, and it represents the beginning of a process of putting together sentences and paragraphs to make a whole essay. As a beginning, a thesis provides a basis for further thinking you must do to produce a fully developed argument. If a thesis is reasonable in the sense that it emerges from your deliberations about what assertion to argue, it should also be reasonable in the sense of being able to be supported by reasons.

We have already seen how the thesis stands for the whole composition, in a way, and represents its overall intention. This means that the parts of a composition are, in some sense, implicit parts of its thesis. As a complete idea, a thesis has several parts, and identifying them is a basis of planning what the essay must say and how it must say it.

For example, suppose I have decided to argue that:

Hydroelectric power provides an acceptable alternative to nuclear energy in supplying present power needs.

Assuming that the assertion satisfies the definition of a thesis in other ways (although it may not), consider how it points forward to an essay. Its parts must become parts of that essay, because that essay would not be complete without satisfying certain demands the thesis makes. The thesis calls for the essay to describe hydroelectric power and nuclear energy, and also to compare them.

according to how each satisfies "present power needs," which must also be described. Finally, the essay must make the essential connection that is asserted in its verb phrase, "provides an acceptable alternative to." This will necessarily entail a discussion of how hydroelectric power is preferable to nuclear power, probably by showing that it has some benefit that nuclear power lacks or that it avoids some risk that nuclear power creates, or maybe both. There are further parts that this essay might contain, of course, but these constitute the essential elements that an essay written from *this* thesis must contain in order to be complete. (This process is the subject of Chapter 7).

This example illustrates that any thesis statement creates responsibilities and provides the basis for fulfilling them. You are free to choose your thesis or to change it at any time, but, having done so, you become responsible for somehow developing the essential parts of your thesis and for *earning* it. There are limitless kinds of possible thesis statements, but all have essential parts that must be developed and connections that must be made.

Knowing precisely what your thesis is helps you to think about what to include and what not to include in your essay. It will help you to distinguish between details that are necessary and those that are superfluous. Of course, no rule will tell you exactly what details are necessary and sufficient to make a complete essay, because every thesis makes its own unique demands. But a precise thesis makes the choices easier to recognize.

The Need for Precision

In the stasis section of this chapter, we saw that different ways of asking a question can lead to different kinds of inquiry. Likewise, the way a thesis is phrased can be very important: Different ways of asserting the same stance can lead to different ways of developing an essay. Hence, you should be ready to ask yourself, "Is this precisely the question?" and "Is this precisely what I want to say?" You should be concerned about the precision of your language as you think about questions at issue and thesis statements.

Let's look at a couple of the examples I used to illustrate questions of con- sequence and see how they might be rephrased more precisely. The question "Do opinion polls discourage people from voting?" seems very general, not because the issue itself is a large one but because the terms are imprecise. Any- one seriously asking such a question would probably intend it to refer to a spe- cific context in which certain kinds of opinion polls occur. But it's hard to tell what is meant when the question remains so vaguely worded. Changing the wording to make it more precise would change the nature of the issue, as in the following possibilities:

Does the early publishing of exit poll results discourage people from voting?

Do people think that opinion polls accurately predict the outcome of elections?

Do opinion polls actually change public opinion?

Do opinion polls encourage a bandwagon effect that makes it impossible for an underdog to win?

Other ways of stating the question are possible. Each of them implies a different meaning for the original question. Any of them could have been intended by the original question. So, until a more precise form of the question is found, it isn't clear exactly what the issue is.

Similarly, the question "What is the effect of too much television on children?" is imprecise. Some people would call this a loaded question because the answer is implied: "Too much television" is already a bad thing, and bad effects are what "too much television" must have. But to make a distinction, the issue probably depends instead on saying what the effect of a *precise* amount of television is. The inquiry might in fact need to address the kind of television and not just its sheer quantity. Also, the issue may need to be defined in terms of some children (i.e., preschoolers) and not others. It all depends on what the members of the discourse community are actually trying to decide. Thus, any of these rephrasings, and others, are possible:

Does lengthy exposure to violent programming cause antisocial behavior in preteens? (What is "lengthy exposure"? What does *violent* mean? What is "antisocial behavior"? Which "preteens"—in which social conditions? . . .)

Do cartoons about consumer products confuse children about the difference between advertising and entertainment? (All such cartoons or those of a certain kind? What does *confuse* mean here? What is "the difference between advertising and entertainment"?) . . .

My further questions about each of these rephrasings indicate that precision is a relative matter. Readers can always ask for clarification. The wording of a question or a thesis statement is precise enough when both you and your reader understand it to mean the same thing. You can't know with certainty, of course, when this will be, so you have to anticipate as many questions as possible and clarify as necessary. When you are part of an argumentative situation that calls for you to write what you think, the effort of drafting and redrafting possible questions at issue and thesis statements for precision is worth it in helping you think clearly about your argument.

Generating Questions About Fiction

For this course, you will probably read mostly nonfiction argumentative essays and develop questions at issue in response to those essays. But how do we

understand an author's argument when it is presented through a fictional text? Asking this question assumes that fictional works—short stories, novels, plays, poems, and films—actually do convey arguments. Remember that even though you are writing academic essays to make your arguments, all writing is an act of communication intended to have an effect on an audience. This means that all writing, even fiction, conveys a *kind* of argument.

The best way to understand the arguments made in fiction is to consider one of the main differences between essays and stories: Whereas a nonfiction essay presents an argument that is given *directly* to the audience, a fictional story presents a plot with characters to whom we respond and through whom a complex argument is made *indirectly*. This indirectness makes the arguments presented in fiction harder for us to respond to because we usually can't locate claims or infer a thesis. We respond sympathetically or unsympathetically to characters and their actions rather than to reasons.

Disagreements about how to understand a fictional argument arise from potential for ambiguity. For example, in the course of a story we may begin to care about a character who eventually goes off to fight in a war. One reader might make an assertion about the novelist's argument: "This author is glorifying war because she gets us to care about a character and, as a result, we respect his decision to go to war." Another reader might object with a more convincing argument, pointing out aspects of the story the other reader has failed to consider: "No, the author doesn't glorify war because the author lets us see that the character is thinking negatively about war at the same time as he goes. In other words, the author is critiquing war because he's showing how strong the pressures are on an individual if they can make someone who is opposed to war decide to fight despite those objections."

These assertions could be developed in an essay with a close look at the elements of the story: How do we know that we are supposed to respect one character and not another? How does the author guide us to have these reactions and feelings? How is the argument complicated when an author leads us to care equally about two characters who disagree in a story? Answering these questions will help guide these two readers in supporting their assertions about the argument conveyed in the story. The question at issue for these two readers is based on *understanding* because both share a common concern. They both want to answer the question "what argument about war is being made by the author of this novel?" But what if our second reader convinces the first reader that the novel does actually critique the war? If they agree on an understanding of the novel, then they might move to a question at issue based on what Wayne C. Booth calls *overstanding*.

A question at issue that leads to overstanding must be based on a shared common ground of understanding: In this case, our readers agree that the author of the novel is critiquing war. At this point, they can move from questions of interpretation to questions of value, consequence, definition, or policy. A possible question at issue in terms of overstanding might be asked in this

way: "Is the argument made as convincingly as it could be?" In answering this question, our two readers might again disagree. One might argue that even though the critique is clear, it isn't as convincing as it could be because the character doesn't die in the war. The reader might argue, "If the author wants to critique war, that critique is limited because the main character we care about lives. As a result, we never have to experience the emotions of sorrow and despair that real people experience when they lose someone they care about."

This reader's argument is based on the idea that emotions must be appealed to in a way that corresponds with emotional responses to similar events in the real world. Our second reader might respond in several ways arguing that the novel does effectively critique war. First, he could argue that other characters we do care about in the novel do die and as a result, we experience the necessary emotions of revulsion to war. This argument would be based on the shared assumption that those emotions are necessary for the argument to be effective. The question at issue is whether the novel appeals to those emotions in the reader. However, our second reader might question this concept itself by agreeing that those emotions are never invoked in the reader while arguing that the author doesn't need to use this emotional appeal to make his argument.

We can consider another type of question that involves overstanding: "Should the author be making this argument?" This question leads us to evaluate a fictional argument even if we agree that the argument is well made. For example, we might agree that a novelist is advocating the use of violence. And we might agree that the argument is conveyed as well as possible. Still, we might want to overstand by pointing out the ethical problems with writing novels that make this kind of argument. On the other hand, we might argue that a novel critiques war but doesn't make that critique as well as it could. Still, we could argue that flawed arguments such as this one are better than convincing arguments that we find ethically wrong.

Stasis questions that come from reading fiction can lead to argumentative essays about issues that are important to our discourse community, a community that includes readers of novels and stories and viewers of fictional works in movies and other forms. These kinds of arguments affect how we respond to ideas as much as direct arguments do, and we can think about them in similar ways.

Revising a Thesis

The process of rethinking and redrafting a thesis is important because it helps you to confront questions in your thinking while changes still can be easily made. It is much easier to rephrase a thesis statement until it works than it is to try to revise a whole essay that has gone off in a confusing direction because it is based on a poor thesis. You cannot predict every feature of an essay in

advance, of course, but you can at least have the advantage of thinking through potential directions that an essay might take. Revising a thesis carefully can help you to avoid premature commitments to ideas that may not work out.

You can use these questions as a guide to revising possible thesis statements:

- Is it an *idea*? Does it state, in a complete sentence, an *assertion*?
- Does it answer a question that is really *at issue* for the audience? (What *kind* of question is it?)
- Does the thesis say exactly what I mean? Are the terms I use precise and clear?
- Has it developed out of a process of reasoning? Have I considered each side of the issue adequately?
- Can it be developed reasonably?

A thesis that satisfies these conditions helps you to see clearly what responsibilities you must meet as you compose an essay in support of it.

Attempting to revise your thesis using these questions will have its payoff in a more coherent, better-argued essay. But it will also prove to be difficult if you feel locked into your ideas and can't change your mind. We feel close to our own ideas, and it's hard to think of them as things to be manipulated and fiddled with, like a clay sculpture. It helps to remember that just because they sound clear and convincing to us, a reader will not necessarily come at them with the same familiarity. I recommend going over these questions with a friend in your class, or as part of a workshop in class where others ask these questions about your thesis statement and you ask them about theirs. Get others' points of view. Try out suggestions. Change the wording just to see how it sounds. Let yourself play with the idea in order to get used to feeling less locked into the version of your thinking that emerged on the first attempt.

Nothing can guarantee that you will come up with a good thesis. How we have good ideas is simply part of the intuitive mystery of the mind, and no rules can be written to account for it. But trying out a thesis and then thinking about rewriting it—with the five criteria in mind—is one way to keep your thinking alive and focused in a productive direction.

Questions for Thought, Discussion, and Writing

1. Identify the thesis of a piece of argumentative writing (or a visual argument) and then ask yourself who the intended or implied audience of that thesis is. What else about that writing (or visual image) confirms or refutes your answer?
2. What kind of stasis question is each of the following? How do you know? Under what circumstances might each be at issue? What related kinds of questions might also be at issue in each case?