Teaching Thesis Statements and Arguments
Jake Cohen and Syelle Graves
Writing Across the Curriculum Fellows
New York City College of Technology
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Agenda

I. Background
II. Designing assignments with thesis focus
III. Revising initial thesis statements
I. Background

Definitions

- Thesis = the position the paper takes, stated at its beginning
- Argument = the process of proving/supporting your position throughout the paper
Why provide extra thesis help?

- Strong thesis statements help students grasp course content in any field
- If a required thesis is subpar, or missing, the paper can suffer
- Students may be misinformed

For example:

- A typical thesis in mathematics (called a theorem):
  - “If \( n \) is even, then \( n^2 \) is even.”

- A typical thesis in psychology:
  - “The efficacy of Haldol in treating schizophrenia is well-documented, but the potential side effects do not outweigh its benefits.”
Exercise

Please take two minutes to generate a sample thesis statement in your field

II. Designing assignments with thesis focus
Assignment Design: Clarity

- Clarify when an assignment needs a thesis
- Remind students what a thesis is!
- Be sure to define a thesis in your discipline
- Model student papers

Assignment Design: Scaffolding

- Making thesis statement its own assignment
- Multiple small, low-stakes writing assignments
- Group work
- Encourage students to revise the thesis throughout the process
Scaffolding Activities

1. Low-stakes writing
2. Peer review/group work
3. Templates
5. Post-draft steps

1. Low-Stakes Writing

- Low-stakes (vs. High-stakes)
- Writing-to-learn
- Examples:
  - Free-write
  - Pro/con list
  - Journal entry
2. Peer review

1. Is there a thesis statement? (circle one) Yes / No. Underline and label the thesis statement on your hard copy of the essay.

2. What do you think the author is trying to say in the thesis? Restate the author’s thesis in your own words, as if you were explaining it to someone else. Your restatement need not be just one sentence.

3. How would you make the thesis clearer or stronger? Re-write the thesis in one sentence below.

3. Templates

Find templates that work for your discipline:

- Author x is often considered _____, but her point about y is _____.
- Although x seems true, y is a better option.
- Based on the outcome of our experiment, we show that _________.

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(From John C. Bean’s *Engaging Ideas*)

Please look at page 2 of your handout

5. Post-draft steps

- Reverse outline
- Create outline from finished draft
- Does each paragraph support thesis statement?
- Alter/change/abandon original thesis statement
Sample Scaffolded Assignment

Please look at page 3 of your handout

Video:
http://youtu.be/HLz2YNUmCCY

III. Revising initial thesis statements
Thesis Statement Revision

- Common thesis statement issues:
  - Too broad
  - Too vague, and/or
  - Too factual
  - ...And usually, a weak position, or none at all
  - This may be due to a lack of contrast

Too Factual/Vague; No Position

- “Anorexia nervosa is a dangerous and sometimes deadly eating disorder occurring mainly in young, upper-middle-class teenagers.”
- Improved: “The eating disorder anorexia nervosa is rarely cured by one treatment alone; only by combining drug therapy with psychotherapy and family therapy can the patient begin the long journey to wellness.”
Too Broad; Weak Position

- “Stravinsky’s *Rite of Spring* should be considered one of the most groundbreaking pieces because it changed the course of music history.”

  Improved: “Although there are many groundbreaking aspects to Stravinsky’s *Rite of Spring*, its most significant one was being one of the first works to overlap multiple, jarring rhythms.”

Too Broad; Weak Position (another example)

- “Being raised bilingual from childhood is advantageous in any society.”

  Improved: “While it is often assumed that being raised bilingual from childhood is advantageous, many do not realize how limited the first language of a heritage speaker often is, since the second language almost always dominates.”
Too Vague; Weak Position

- “When a woman suffering from postpartum psychosis does something terrible, such as injuring or killing her child, she obviously needs help.”

- Revise this thesis in small groups!

- Improved: “When a woman suffering from postpartum psychosis injures or kills her child, she should be treated for mental illness rather than charged as a criminal.”

Questions?

Resources and Works Cited


(For templates):