

Mastering the Essay Practice Week – Strong Thesis Statements

READINGS

- “**The Cynic: Can’t We Be Cynical About Cynicism?**” (Peter Kreeft, *The Journey: A Spiritual Roadmap for Modern Pilgrims*, Chapter Three)
- “**Argument**” (The Writing Centre at UNC-Chapel Hill)
- <http://writingcenter.unc.edu/handouts/argument/>
- “**Audience**” (The Writing Centre at UNC-Chapel Hill) <https://writingcenter.unc.edu/tips-and-tools/audience/>
- “**Writing a Thesis and Making an Argument**” (The University of Iowa, College of Liberal Arts and Sciences) <https://clas.uiowa.edu/history/teaching-and-writing-center/guides/argumentation>

Writing Lesson/Discussion

- **Argument** could be described as the art of trying to get the other person to understand the truth. Disagreements are merely people not seeing eye-to-eye, nothing more. Fights are where the parties uncharitably attack each other. Arguments are attempts to peaceably show the truth in a way that makes sense by backing it up with reason.
- Note that if both parties in an argument are *only* trying to persuade the other and are not *themselves* also pursuing the truth—that is, willing to be persuaded, to understand what truth is differently than how they began—an argument will always end in mere conflict. Another way of understanding the art of argument is the pursuit of the truth together.
- Every essay is an attempt to show the truth about something. Though there are many kinds of essays, all have the same goal—to cut through confusion, lack of clarity and error with the double-edged sword of truth and reason.
- **Audience:** Human beings, however, are not merely logical computing machines. People also love, fear, desire. Sound persuasion requires sound logic, but essays also require beauty, proper pathos (appeal to the emotions), and appreciation and compassion for the audience/reader. A good writer has to be able to keep an "imaginary" reader in mind and anticipate what the reader already knows and believes about the subject and what internal obstacles the reader might have in being persuaded. It can be helpful to imagine a specific, imaginary (or real) person that you are writing to. What might you need to imagine or learn about your audience to write to him or her?
 - It's easy to think of school essays as being "for your teacher" and sometimes they are. Often, however, your teacher will tell you to think of your audience as another student who is intelligent but not as knowledgeable as you. In this course, you will need to choose an audience for each paper—if you are writing about computer programming, for instance, will you write to a specialist or a beginner audience?
- **Writing as thinking:** Many people think of essays simply as hoops to jump through for school, without much meaning. This is a wasted opportunity. Writing is thinking. If we cannot articulate our ideas clearly, our ideas are not our own. We haven't tested them to see if they are true. Fine-tuning your essay-writing skills is really fine-tuning your power of thought and your power to express what you think effectively. Just as sword mastery is a difficult process, good essay writing is very difficult. A squire will be disarmed many times before he becomes an accomplished knight—but if you see this as an opportunity and throw your best effort into it, you could become a master swordsman, fighting for truth.
- **Thesis:** The thesis is literally the point of your sword, of your essay. What you are trying to

prove. Everything else in the essay flows from the thesis, which is why we put lots of work into honing a good one. Rarely is our first version of the thesis the best version—we want to continually revise the thesis firstly to make ourselves understand what we mean better and what is true, and secondly so that what we say is clear and compelling to our reader.

- **It's usually a good idea to move from a topic to a question to a thesis:** "ancient Greece" → "Is it better to understand ancient Greece as the first Western civilization or the last Near Eastern civilization?" → "Ancient Greece is best understood as the last Near Eastern civilization." Why might it be helpful to begin with a good question rather than immediately start with a claim?
- *A good thesis must be debatable (not a matter of fact), significant (important to the reader in some way), specific, appropriately broad/narrow for the length of the assignment.*
- **Thesis Revision:** Rather than discarding a thesis and moving to a new one, if you have a good topic, you want to go through a process of revision. One method is to find the "weakest link:" Start with a thesis statement you know is weak and underline the word or brief phrase which is most vague, unclear, wordy, or weak. Strengthen that one part and then find the new "weakest link," underline, and revise. If your thesis seems obvious or unimportant, ask, "so what? why should this matter to my reader?"
- **Thesis Formulae:** Some theses need to be expanded to make them stronger, more specific, and more significant. Here are a few formulas for theses. NOTE that these formulae are *not exhaustive* and are definitely NOT the only or necessarily the best way to write a thesis.
 - **"Though many believe x, actually y."** This formula is useful for controversial topics in which the audience is likely to hold a different opinion. For example: "Though most consider Milton's Satan in *Paradise Lost* to be the hero, actually Milton uses Satan's heroic qualities to parody the pagan idea of heroism." OR "Though long-held nutritional advice holds that avoiding red meats is healthy, recent research suggests that red meats can be an essential part of a healthy diet."
 - **The "because" formula.** This formula includes supporting evidence in the thesis. The "because" can also indicate why the topic should be significant to the reader. Example: "Studying abroad benefits students more than studying at domestic universities *because* life experience of another culture offers a richer and longer lasting educational transformation."
 - One variation of the "because" formula is to list three reasons or ways that your claim is true in your thesis.
- **Counter arguments:** Counter arguments directly contradict a claim. Why might it be an excellent intellectual exercise to anticipate what counter arguments your audience might have?
 - **Examples:**
 - Thesis: "Though long-held nutritional advice holds that avoiding red meats is healthy, recent research suggests that red meats can be an essential part of a healthy diet." Counter argument: "Current research indicating that red meat has essential health benefits is faulty because it only includes a small number of studies which rely on a very small number of participants."
 - Thesis: "Studying abroad benefits students more than studying at domestic universities *because* life experience of another culture offers a richer and longer lasting educational transformation." Counter argument: "Studying abroad is not helpful to someone's intellectual education because the difficulties of learning a new language and culture distract from classwork."

Assignment

Make sure that you adhere to the formatting guidelines your tutor gave you in class. You are expected to adhere to these in every assignment. Double-space, use Times New Roman, and page numbers. Use a good formula for file nomenclature ("Name, Assignment #").

Your assignment is to go through the "topic" → "question" → "thesis" → "counter argument" process five times. Come up with five topics which each have a good question and an answering thesis. For at least *three* of these five, show me your revision process by giving me two or three "versions" of the thesis that helped you get to a "final" version. Each of the five "final" theses should have a corresponding "counter argument." Theses should be definite statements with which a sane person might disagree, written in clear, specific language. They should take the form of statements, not questions, and should be complete sentences.

Example:

Topic: 2014 Arctic Expedition

Question: "Was the ship found Franklin's expedition shipwreck?"

Thesis v1: They discovered the Franklin expedition's shipwreck in 2014.

Thesis v2: The wreck found in the Arctic in 2014 was truly the Franklin expedition's ship as shown by the location of the wreck, the remarkable preservation of a 19th century ship, and the proof given by specific images which match historical accounts.

Counter argument: The wreck found in the Arctic in 2014 may not have been Franklin's because . . . [insert reasons].