

Mastering the Essay
Lesson 1: Testing and Refining Your Argument

Readings:

- **Tips for Reading Summa Articles**
- **Three Articles from the *Summa Theologica*** (Thomas Aquinas: Whether All Vows are Binding, Whether There Is a Sin in Lack of Mirth, Whether the Fellowship of Friends is Necessary for Happiness)

Class Outline

- Last week, we discussed the importance of revising and strengthening your thesis. This week, we will look at one way to think through, revise, and strengthen your argument as a whole *before you write*. Summa articles represent models of organized thinking when coming up with an argument. We will discuss how, while they are not essays, they are good examples of arguments developed where everything is integrally connected to examining the thesis. Everything in an argument must directly relate to backing up the thesis in some way; even the counter arguments are part of strengthening the thesis.
- Questions to ask as you revise theses:
 - Significance: Does my thesis matter? What is the "so what"? Why should my reader bother spending time reading this paper?
 - Specificity: Is my topic reasonably narrow/broad for the length of paper I need to write? Do I need to make it broader? More specific? Am I making a particular claim about the topic and indicating why it might be true?
 - Strength: Is my thesis making a direct claim? Is it a claim that can be reasonably argued with? How controversial is it?
 - Audience: Who is my audience? Is this thesis phrased to be intelligible and compelling to my specific reader? What does my reader already know? What would need to be explained? Does my reader already have beliefs about this topic?

Assignment

Write a Summa article using the same model as Thomas Aquinas. Come up with strong arguments backing up your thesis! This Summa that you write will become an outline and an essay in the coming weeks, so choose a topic with which you would like to spend time. Here is the model your Summa should follow:

Whether (the point you want to make is the case or not).

It would seem (that the opposite of what you want to prove is true).

Objection 1: (One of the best arguments somebody might make against the point you are trying to prove.)

Objection 2: (Another argument against the point you are trying to make.)

Objection 3: (Another argument against the point you are trying to make.)

On the contrary, (Try to find a good quote that sums up your position, or say something short and pithy.)

I answer that (Summarize your best argument for the point you want to make.)

Reply to Objection 1: (Show why Objection 1 doesn't hold up.)

Reply to Objection 2: (Show why Objection 2 doesn't hold up.)

Reply to Objection 3: (Show why Objection 3 doesn't hold up.)

Here is an example:

Whether it is a better choice to read the book, *The Last Castle Lord*, than to watch the movie adaptation?

It seems that it is a better choice to watch the movie than to read the book.

Objection 1: While the book is entertaining, the movie might be more educational. The book is set in a fantasyland and probably will not teach the reader anything new. The movie sets the story in eighteenth century Bulgaria and reveals quite a lot about the culture at the time.

Objection 2: Reading a book takes more effort than simply sitting back and watching a movie. It's better to have to put in less effort than more.

Objection 3: The director of the movie is far more prestigious than the author of the book. Most people have heard of the great director, Guppy Snagsby, but few people have heard of the author, Morleena Noggs.

On the contrary, "Greatness in art requires emotional and moral depth in its characters." – Bob Blithely

In answer, there are three main reasons why a person would spend the time better reading the book than seeing the film. The cunning and courageous personality of the hero, Jack, is the most interesting and entertaining part of the story. In the book, his personality is fleshed out, while the movie spent the time on lengthy chase scenes rather than showing his true character. Also, works of entertainment are more worthwhile if they glorify truth and goodness. The book shows Jack's decision to be merciful as well as heroic, but the movie misleadingly makes it look like weakness. Also, there are translations of the book in almost every language, making it easily accessible to the reader. The film, on the other hand, will be a waste of time for most people, since the only version is in the Piraha language with no subtitles.

Reply to Objection 1: While the book might not educate people about real-life cultures, it nonetheless will educate them in virtue, which remains the same whether in a fantasy kingdom or in Bulgaria. Education in virtue is even more important than education in social studies.

Reply to Objection 2: Things that require more effort are often more worthwhile because of the time invested. The movie may require less effort, but it gives less reward as a result.

Reply Objection 3: The famousness of a work's creator has nothing to do with the quality of the work they produce—after all, every great author is unknown at the beginning of his career, and many of the great masters were not famous in their own lifetimes.