



a place of mind

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

Stating a Thesis

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8 January 2008

Although it's not always necessary or desirable to state a thesis and defend it, this convention for writing is prevalent and generally expected in academia. A good argument is *de rigueur* in academia. It is quite common to hear the professor reiterate "what is the thesis?" or the editor impress on the author the "need to state an argument."

Hence, it is crucial that graduate students can confidently write with this convention of stating and defending theses (claim, premise & warrant, argument, etc.). Quite often, student receive a pattern of comments or margin notes from professors: 'Thesis too vague... paper unwieldy;' 'Thesis too narrow or factual... cannot be developed into a full essay;' 'Did not take a stance... observations are stated instead of assertions.'

The purpose of stating a thesis or argument is to provide dialogue (inspire, raise questions, provoke thoughts, etc.) over an idea, issue, data, knowledge, information, etc. that can be demonstrated to be the case, "hold water," be true, considerable, persuasive, understandable, etc. The challenge is to *state and demonstrate* a thesis (i.e., provide evidence for the thesis stated). In this way, all theses are debatable and discursive; a thesis is an assertion or stand on a topic. It is an arguable position, not an observation. The thesis anchors the essay and provides its direction by asserting a controlling idea. It keeps the content of the essay focused.

In academia, this convention typically implies entering an ongoing (current, timely, historical, etc.) conversation within a discipline, across disciplines, between or among authors, etc. This gives the thesis currency but also means that students have to be finely tuned into the discourse and arguments within disciplines, and clear about who is saying what, and where they said it. Of course, this places a burden on the student of interdisciplinarity to engage with numerous and various discourses and sources. But this interdisciplinarity can be powerful for demonstrating contradictions and shortcomings of ongoing arguments.

This convention is not merely limited to academia. Journalists, for example, commonly draw from, or begin with a clear thesis. Witness Anna Maria Tremonti introducing a program on her show, *The Current*, on the morning of 8 January 2008:

Today Mr. Arar is a household name. The ordeals of Abdullah Almalki and Ahmad El Maati have been well documented, including on this program. Mr. Nureddin's case, however, has never generated the same kind of heat. Perhaps it's because his time in a Middle Eastern prison can be measured in weeks rather than months or years. Or perhaps it's because of his reluctance to speak publicly for fear of destroying the life he's trying to rebuild.

Notice how she states the thesis in conversation with the literature and other journalists. “Arar is a household name... ordeals of Abdullah Almalki and Ahmad El Maati have been well documented...”— She sums up the literature review, so to speak. Then she states the thesis: “Mr. Nureddin's case, however, has never generated the same kind of heat. Perhaps it's because his time in a Middle Eastern prison can be measured in weeks rather than months or years. Or perhaps it's because of his reluctance to speak publicly”

Stating and demonstrating a thesis does not imply a defensive or argumentative style. Some defenses of theses truly are arguments and some defenders truly are defensive. However, the vast majority of academic arguments are focused engagements with discourses and ongoing conversations, and range from deadly serious to entirely playful.

Argument Tips

Argument by Symmetry

1. If we are entertaining something called the learning sciences, I will argue here that we have to necessarily entertain what I'll call “the learning arts.”

Argument by Extension or Implication

1. If web 2.0 transforms the everyday reader into an everyday writer, then by extension the author must be dead. The reader may not have killed the author, as Bathes implies, but...

Argument by Contra-distinction

1. While Voithofer argues that new media research emerges from the principles of new media (i.e., Manovich, 2001), I argue that new media based research has much less to do with new media than with the rhetorical and spiritual power of the new medium. By new medium I refer to...
2. Contrary to Everett who proposes..., I argue that...

Argument by Corrective

1. Although Hayles attends to the nuances of code representing or embodying the unconscious, my point here is that she fails to distinguish programming code from machine code and thereby overlooks an already fragmented unconscious. The implications are that...
2. I wish to throw into sharp relief Stone's association of the body and embodiment with feminism in order to effectively distinguish liberal from material feminisms in cyberspace.

Argument Traps

1. **Tautological Argument**- Argument based on circular logic
e.g., Teachers should use technology because the net generation uses technology
2. **Axiomatic Argument**- Argument of or for the obvious (often criticized as trivial, superficial, inconsequential or irrelevant)
e.g., New media can make a difference in how we learn

3. **Idiosyncratic or Solipsistic Argument-** Argument that is self-centered, self-serving, or overly myopic
e.g., My students made great progress when I used Moodle
4. **Prima facie Argument-** Argument that mistakes surface for depth
e.g., Young students are digital natives requiring different teaching approaches
5. **Ad hominem Argument-** Argument that makes personal attacks
e.g., N.A. Publication has no credibility here and is otherwise a greedy bureaucrat
6. **Ad nauseum Argument-** Argument that unnecessarily extends or prolongs an argument
e.g., Cognition is a function of the brain.
7. **Redundant Argument-** Argument that has already been made
e.g., Communities of practice are, by nature, both centralized and decentralized
8. **Red Herring or Straw Man Argument-** Argument that misrepresents, misconstrues or distorts a position for rhetorical advantage
e.g., Hutchins argues that the brain has no role in cognition

Guides

The *Craft of Research* organizes the convention of stating arguments as follows:

- 7 Making Good Arguments: An Overview 114
 - 7.1 Argument and Conversation 114
 - 7.2 Basing Claims on Reasons 116
 - 7.3 Basing Reasons on Evidence 117
 - 7.4 Acknowledging and Responding to Alternatives 118
 - 7.5 Warranting the Relevance of Reasons 119
 - 7.6 Building Complex Arguments Out of Simple Ones 121
 - 7.7 Arguments and Your Ethos 122
- Quick Tip: Designing Arguments Not for Yourself but for Your Readers: Two Common Pitfalls 124

See also:

<http://www.logicalfallacies.info/>

http://www9.georgetown.edu/faculty/kingch/How_to_Think.htm

<http://www.fallacyfiles.org/index.html>