

# Thesis Statement & Essay Organization Mini-Lesson (Philosophy)

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## *Lesson Objective*

Students will learn several strategies for organizing short, persuasive essays, preferably after they have started pre-writing. This lesson emphasizes the usefulness of developing strong thesis statements in a philosophy course, especially for assignments that ask students to present and evaluate a philosophical argument.

## *List of Handouts*

1. “Deciphering an Essay Assignment”
2. “Formulating a Thesis Statement”
3. “Formulating a Thesis Statement, cont.”
4. “Creating an Outline”
5. “Sample Outline”

## *Length of Lesson*

The lesson should take 25-30 minutes.

## *Variations for different disciplines*

1. General mini-lesson
2. Textual analysis mini-lesson

## *Source*

Parts of this mini-lesson were taken from Purdue’s OWL website, <http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/>, as well as the St. Helen’s School District website. Other parts were written by Marnie Brady (WF, 2011-2012), Stefania Heim (WF 2011-2012), Tahneer Oksman (WF, 2009-2011), and Jordan Pascoe (WF, 2010-2011).

## *File name*

ML\_Thesis and Organizing\_Phil.doc

## *Lesson Instructions*

1. Introduce the topic by explaining to students that writing a paper is a process that always begins with responding to an instructor's assignment. Distribute Handout 1 and help students articulate what the sample essay question is asking.
2. As a class, begin to brainstorm ideas and responses to the essay question. Discuss the free-writing process.
3. Distribute Handout 2 and review the three rules set out on thesis statement writing. On the board, you should write:

*Thesis Statements:*

1. *Debatable*
2. *Scope*
3. *Responds to assignment*

Review the sample thesis statements, eliciting criticism from students based on the criteria above.

4. Give students a few moments, either alone or in pairs, to develop their own thesis statements. Ask for statements from volunteers and critique them as a group until the class comes up with a strong thesis statement.
5. Distribute Handout 3, which provide responses to the sample thesis statements and a strong thesis statement. Discuss why this sample statement is effective.
6. Distribute Handout 4, and discuss the different ways you might create an outline. Also discuss how and why outlines are useful. You can also raise alternative outline strategies, such as reverse outlines describing what each paragraph of a draft does to organize your thinking during the writing process – these are a great tool in the revision process.

On the board, you might attempt to sketch a very brief outline for the class using the sample thesis statement from Handout 3. Finally, distribute Handout 5 with the sample outline we have provided.

## Deciphering an Essay Assignment

### Essay Question

Argument: Smith claims that video games often reward players for simulating violence, and thus enhance the learning of violent behaviors. In order to lessen the violent behaviors exhibited by young people and adults alike, he believes that the government should ban the sale and use of such games. Present and evaluate his argument.

### Step 1: Read the Assignment

The assignment can guide you as you organize your essay. Often, it contains important clues about the kind of essay you need to write. Read the assignment carefully: what is it asking you to do?

- Present
- Evaluate

### Step 2: Generate Ideas for Prewriting

What information do we need in order to write this essay? What kind of criteria or evidence do we need in order to evaluate the argument?

Ask yourself: What do I know about the situation referred to in this argument? What is/are the argument/s being made? What are the stated premises? What are the unstated assumptions?

- Identify the Argument/s
- Brainstorm Premises/Assumptions
- Freewrite

Once you've gathered your ideas, it's time to formulate a thesis statement.

## **Formulating a Thesis Statement**

A thesis statement is a single, complete sentence that succinctly expresses your view concerning a particular topic. It will generally be included in the introductory paragraph of your essay, often serving as the final sentence of that paragraph. You must be sure that you support the statement in the body of the essay.

### **Three Main Questions to Ask About Your Thesis Statement**

- ▶ Is your thesis statement debatable?
- ▶ Does your thesis statement have a proper scope (not too narrow and not too broad)?
- ▶ Does your thesis statement respond to the assignment?

### **Consider the following examples. Are these strong thesis statements?**

1. The author advocates banning violent video games in order to mitigate violent behavior.
2. Smith's argument is false because I play video games and I am not violent.
3. Smith presents little evidence to support the argument.

**Write your own thesis statement in response to the assignment:**

## Formulating a Thesis Statement, cont.

### Response to the sample thesis statements

1. **The author advocates banning violent video games in order to mitigate violent behavior.**

This statement is not debatable, it is simply a re-statement of the author's position.

2. **Smith's argument is false because I play video games and I am not violent.**

This statement does not respond to the assignment. The statement also has improper scope: instead of evaluating the argument on its own terms, this statement inappropriately inserts unsubstantiated personal experience.

3. **Smith presents little evidence to support the argument.**

This statement is overly general.

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### Sample thesis statement

Smith's argument fails because he does not provide evidence of a causal link between violent video games and violent behavior.

## Creating an Outline

Your thesis statement can help you to organize your essay. Now that you have a thesis, you can develop an outline for your essay. An outline organizes your ideas, and it makes writing your essay easier. A clear essay must be well-organized, and an outline helps you to think about the logic of your argument. It can also help you to show relationships among ideas in your writing, and it can define boundaries and groups of ideas.

### How do I create an outline?

There are many ways you can organize an essay. Remember, the writing assignment may give you clues about how to organize your essay. A well-structured thesis, too, may help you to shape your outline. You might do any of the following:

- **Brainstorm:** List all the ideas that you want to include in your paper.
- **Organize:** Group related ideas together.
- **Order:** Arrange material in a logical order appropriate to your topic (e.g., introduction, exposition, evaluation, recommendation, conclusion).
- **Label:** Create main and sub headings.

Creating an outline will make organizing your thoughts a lot easier, either before or after you have written an initial draft of your essay. Even if you end up departing from the structure you create with the outline, making any kind of outline (even just jotting down some main ideas) will be beneficial to your writing process. Outlines, as well as thesis statements, can and should be revised as you write, as your ideas should become sharper and more refined throughout the writing process.

## Sample Outline

### I. Introduction:

**Thesis:** Smith's argument fails because he does not provide evidence of a causal link between violent video games and violent behavior.

### II. Body:

A. **Present the argument.** Smith concludes that violent behavior will be reduced if the government bans violent video games. The argument is based on the premise that playing violent video games leads to violent behavior. It also assumes that the government is capable of sufficiently enforcing such a ban.

B. **Evaluate the argument.** The argument's conclusion and underlying premises are unsubstantiated. There is no evidence provided to support the underlying premise that behavior modification of video game players takes place in the experience of playing videos. Furthermore, video game players who receive symbolic rewards for simulating violence on screen do not necessarily receive rewards (material or symbolic) for violent behavior off screen. ....

C. **Make a recommendation.** Greater evidence is needed to develop a strong conclusion regarding the relationship between simulated violence and violent behavior.

### III. Conclusion

**Summary:** Restate your thesis and key assertions using different words. Consider some of the implications of your paper.