

Thesis Statement (Textual Analysis) Mini-Lesson

Lesson Objective

The purpose of this lesson is to provide students with a working definition of a thesis statement while also helping them acquire techniques that will aid them in constructing their own thesis statements, particularly in response to an essay assignment focusing on textual analysis.

List of Handouts

1. “Deciphering an Essay Assignment”
2. “Two Images of Pope Innocent X”
3. “Formulating a Thesis Statement”
4. “Formulating a Thesis Statement, cont.”
5. “Tips for Constructing a Thesis Statement”

Length of Lesson

The lesson should take 25-30 minutes.

Variations for different disciplines

1. General 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).

Images: “Portrait of Pope Innocent X” by Diego Velazquez, 1650. “Study after Velázquez's Portrait of Pope Innocent X” by Francis Bacon, 1953. (Wikipedia.)

File name

ML_Thesis Statement_Textual Analysis.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. Distribute Handout 2, which includes the images. Brainstorm together as a class. What are some of the similarities and differences between these two images? Write student ideas on the board.
3. Distribute Handout 3 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 4, which provide responses to the sample thesis statements and a strong thesis statement. Discuss why this sample statement is effective.
6. Distribute Handout 5 with additional tips for constructing thesis statements. If there is time, discuss these examples with the class.

Deciphering an Essay Assignment

Sample Essay Question

Assignment: Write a paper comparing and contrasting two views of Pope Innocent X (1574-1655), the one depicted on the left by 17th-century Spanish painter Diego Velazquez and the one depicted on the right by 20th-century Irish painter Francis Bacon. Use concrete examples from the paintings to prove your thesis and strengthen your argument.

Step 1: Read the Assignment

The assignment can guide you as you identify a thesis statement and 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?

- Describe Velazquez's painting
- Describe Bacon's painting
- Identify specific ways in which the two paintings are similar and specific ways in which they are different
- Use these details to make an argument about the relationship between the two paintings

Step 2: Generate Ideas and Pre-write

Before you launch into your actual paper, spend some time thinking and writing about the different points above. Go back to the text (in this case, the paintings), and underline or highlight relevant information. Make notes to yourself in the margins.

Free-writing and brainstorming are helpful ways for you to generate ideas and evidence before you settle on an argument.

- Brainstorm
- Collect evidence
- Free-write

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



: "Portrait of Pope Innocent X" by Diego Velázquez, 1650. "Study after Velázquez's Portrait of Pope Innocent X" by Francis Bacon, 1953. (Wikipedia.)

Formulating a Thesis Statement

A thesis statement is a single, complete sentence that succinctly expresses your view concerning a particular topic. Your thesis statement should explain the significance of the evidence and information you've gathered. It should not be a restatement of the actual information itself! It will generally be included in the introductory paragraph of your essay, often serving as the final sentence of that paragraph, and 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 appropriately to the assignment?

Consider the following examples. Are these strong thesis statements?

1. Diego Velazquez's depiction of Pope Innocent X is more realistic than Francis Bacon's.
2. In the 17th century, paintings were more realistic than they were in the 20th century.
3. Francis Bacon doesn't have a lot of respect for Pope Innocent X.

Write your own thesis statement in response to the assignment:

Formulating a Thesis Statement, cont.

Response to the sample thesis statements

1. **Diego Velazquez's depiction of Pope Innocent X is more realistic than Francis Bacon's.**

This statement is not debatable. It is impossible to imagine someone coming up with a counter-argument, for example, that Francis Bacon's painting is more realistic.

2. **In the 17th century, paintings were more realistic than they were in the 20th century.**

This statement is overly broad. Based only on evidence supplied by these two paintings, we can not make generalizations about entire centuries.

3. **Francis Bacon doesn't have a lot of respect for Pope Innocent X.**

This statement does not respond to the assignment, which asked us to compare the two paintings, not just write about one. In addition, it does not give any sense of the kind of evidence it will use to substantiate this claim.

Sample thesis statement

As compared with Francis Bacon's abstract and violent depiction, Diego Velazquez's more traditional painting of Pope Innocent X suggests greater respect for church authority.

Tips for Constructing a Thesis Statement

- A thesis statement should not contain two conflicting ideas. If two ideas are in conflict, it is impossible to support them both.
- A thesis statement should never be so broad that it's difficult to discuss all of the relevant information.
- A thesis statement is an assertion that requires evidence and support, not a universally agreed-upon fact or an observation.

A universally agreed-upon fact or an observation: People use many lawn chemicals.

Thesis: People are poisoning the environment with chemicals merely to keep their lawns green.

- A thesis takes a stand rather than announcing a subject.

Announcement: The thesis of this paper is the difficulty of solving our environmental problems.

Thesis: Solving our environmental problems is more difficult than many environmentalists believe.

- A thesis is the main idea, *not* the title. It must be a complete sentence that expresses in some detail what claim you plan to support.

Title: Social Security and Old Age

Thesis: Continuing changes in the Social Security System make it almost impossible to plan intelligently for retirement.

- A thesis statement is narrow, rather than broad. If the thesis statement is sufficiently narrow, it can be fully supported.

Broad: The American steel industry has many problems.

Narrow: The primary problem of the American steel industry is the lack of funds to renovate outdated plants and equipment.

- A thesis statement is specific rather than vague or general.

Vague: Hemingway's war stories are very good.

Specific: Hemingway's stories helped create a new prose style by employing extensive dialogue, shorter sentences, and strong Anglo-Saxon words.

- A thesis statement has one main point rather than several main points. More than one point may be too difficult for the reader to understand and the writer to support.

More than one main point: Stephen Hawking's physical disability has not prevented him from becoming a world-renowned physicist, and his public appearances have brought important attention to neurodegenerative diseases while also bringing popular attention to the field of theoretical physics.

One main point: Stephen Hawking's status in the public eye has helped to revive a previously waning interest in theoretical physics.