An integrated approach to teaching the thesis-driven essay


- Reading matters
  - Deep, active reading. Annotating. Resources.

- Discussion questions / jottings assignments
  - Secretly assigning pre-writing

- Discussion discipline: assertions and illustrations
  - Speaking paragraphs

- Topics assignment
  - Connecting with previous writing and discussion

- Resources for students
  - Sample essays
  - A Writer’s Reference
  - Nancy Barry essay excerpt

- Scaffolding the process
  - An example: The Odyssey Project

- Peer workshop ideas

- Responding and grading
  - Responding to completed drafts (formative evaluation when they can respond)
  - Grading the final version (summative evaluation)

- After the graded papers are returned to the students
  - Observations for the whole group / establishing emphases for future writing
  - Using sample essays
The central feature of an academic essay that helps this audience of readers to understand and be persuaded by its argument is the thesis . . . . A thesis statement is not an announcement about what your paper will say or do, nor is it simply a topic. For example, in writing about The Odyssey, your topic might be “Athene’s help to Odysseus” or “heroic qualities of Odysseus.” These are legitimate topics for an essay, but they are not arguments. In order to make an argument about these topics, you need to explain your judgment or interpretation of that topic idea. Because thesis statements suggest a line of argument for your essay, most of them have two basic parts: a conclusion and a reason. For example, you might argue that “Odysseus may seem to succeed only because he has a powerful goddess on his side, but Athene favors Odysseus above all other men and helps him defeat the suitors because he embodies all the qualities which she, as a goddess, is known for.”

This thesis statement has a qualifying phrase (“Odysseus may seem to succeed only because he has a powerful goddess on his side”), a conclusion (“Athene favors Odysseus above all other men and helps him defeat the suitors”), and the reason for that conclusion (“because Odysseus embodies all the qualities which she, as a goddess, is known for”). Note that this assertion makes an interpretive judgment about Athene’s motives; it doesn’t simply re-tell or summarize what happens in the play. The writer would then need to explain why and how certain details and passages from the poem support this argument. An effective thesis statement makes a detailed, specific, and argumentative claim about what the essay will prove.

You might be thinking that this type of statement seems difficult to compose, and in a way, you’re right. Most writers only discover the final wording of their thesis after they have composed several drafts of an essay. As you begin working on a paper, you should try to assert a tentative thesis, but only after you have truly worked out all of your supporting evidence (including contradictory points of view) will you be able to refine the specific wording and phrasing of your final thesis statement.

So even though the thesis statement is a crucial component of a successful essay, few writers begin their writing process by trying to nail down a thesis too soon. Our pattern becomes a bit messier: we write; we gather evidence; we let that evidence help us refine our central, tentative thesis; and only after several drafts, are we really able to know exactly what we intend to argue.

Often this progress toward a thesis results from advancing a tentative thesis idea (a hypothesis), then probing it with questions (like those a skeptical reader might ask), and refining the hypothesis in response to these questions. The pattern can go something like this, where “H” stands for hypothesis and “Q” stands for question:
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H > Q > H > Q > H . . . Thesis!

Or maybe your search begins not with a hypothesis but with a question. To begin with an interesting question, one that can’t be answered in a simple factual way by simply pointing to details in the text, is, in fact, an excellent way to arrive at an interesting, interpretive thesis.

Here are some additional guidelines and questions for you to consider in evaluating the effectiveness of your thesis:

Tests of a Good Thesis:
1) Is it a significant and well-focused argument?
2) Does it offer a clear-cut point of view, which a reader might either agree or disagree with? In other words, does it admit alternatives or anticipate possible counter-arguments? In the example on Athene given above, some readers might view her help to him as mere rivalry with Poseidon or arbitrary favoritism or as the result of an erotic attraction to the hero, which suggests that this assertion makes a claim that needs to be proven.
3) Is the thesis so difficult to prove that the reader will be unable to understand it? In the end, your thesis needs to be clearly worded, with a specific and concrete focus that the reader will be able to understand.
4) Does the thesis make a claim that is so obvious that it isn’t worth proving in the first place? For example, an assertion that says “Odysseus reaches home due to his strength, tenacity, and intelligence” doesn’t really teach the reader anything about the epic that isn’t immediately apparent. Remember, your job is to develop a specific point of view, or argument, about your topic, one that will engage and heighten your reader’s understanding of the work being discussed.
5) Does the thesis indicate a pattern of development for the paper as a whole? A good thesis statement actually “charts” or “outlines” your essay; it is both a “promise” to your reader about what you will talk about, as well as an embedded map for how the essay will be organized. An essay based on the sample thesis about Athene and Odysseus would first show how Odysseus may seem to triumph only because he has an unfair and arbitrary advantage due to Athene’s help, and then it would illustrate those key moments when Odysseus earns or wins Athene’s favor due to traits that he shares with her, traits that mythology describes as “the gifts of Athene.”

[Note: See similar thesis tests in A Writer’s Reference, section C1-c (p. 11).]
Workshop: Discussing Essay #1

_In this workshop we will practice ways of speaking to each other about our writing. Our aim term will be twofold: (1) We want to learn how to be helpful to our workshop partners as readers. And (2), as we develop our skills as readers of others’ writing, we want to learn to be better critical readers and “editors” of our own writing. The workshop activities are in four parts, to be completed in order._

**Part A**
First, read others’ essay drafts carefully. Then: the author begins this part of the workshop by articulating questions about his or her draft. Here are some questions you are free to use if you feel they are applicable to your concerns. You may also ask questions of your own. Then, of course, the reader responds to the writer’s questions.

1. Is my argument too obvious or self-evident? In other words, can you imagine someone actually disagreeing with it? If it is too obvious, is there another point in the essay which I could use as my thesis or a point I could add to the thesis in order to make it more complex and arguable?
2. Is there a point in the essay where I have needlessly summarized instead of analyzed the text?
3. What in the essay do you particularly like? What works well?
4. Are there specific points at which the essay is unclear or where you feel a little lost?
5. Can you come up with a counter argument that I have not considered? Is there a portion of the text I’m treating that does not fit with my reading of it, or that I haven’t commented on?
6. Here’s something I feel unsure about in my essay: _______________. What do you think?
Part B
In this part of the workshop the reader initiates discussion. Here are some ways of defining and phrasing your questions:

1. What more can you say about _____?
2. Tell me more about _____.
3. Have you considered including _____?
4. I really liked your discussion of _____ because _____.
5. What do you feel is the main purpose of your essay?
6. What do you want your reader to understand about _____?
7. What did you mean by _____?
8. I can’t quite see why you’ve decided to _____.
9. Could you explain why you _____?
10. According to the tests of a thesis, you’ve done ________ really well. But I wonder about number _________. Let me try to explain what I mean . . . .
11. I see a conflict between _____ and _____ . What do you think?
12. How do you think your reader will react to _____?
13. I don’t quite see how I’m supposed to connect _____ with _____ . What did you have in mind?
14. What evidence or examples might you use to make _____ clearer?
15. What might you do in your introduction to help set up _____ in the body of your argument?
16. Is there something about _____ you might add to your conclusion to make it more than just a summary of what you’ve already said?

Part C
Now, re-read your partner’s introductory paragraph and underline what you understand to be the thesis of the essay. Then, on a separate sheet of paper, write out an answer to each one of the questions that Professor Nancy Barry provided as the tests of a good thesis:

1. Is it a significant and well-focused argument?
2. Does it offer a clear-cut point of view, which a reader might either agree or disagree with?
3. Is the thesis so difficult to prove that you have little chance of convincing a reader, or is it so complicated or unclear that the reader will be unable to understand it?
4. Does the thesis make a claim that is so obvious that it isn’t worth proving in the first place?
5. Does the thesis indicate a pattern of development for the paper as a whole? (A good thesis statement actually “charts” or “outlines” your essay; it is both a “promise” to your reader about what you will talk about, and an embedded map for how the essay will be organized.)
Part D
Go through your partner’s essay again and underline the main topic assertion in each paragraph. (If the main assertion is not stated, but is implicit, write out in the margin what you think it is; if you can’t find a main topic assertion or there seem to be several topics treated in one paragraph, say so in the margin.) Then, on a separate sheet, write an evaluation of the essay’s organization by answering the following questions:

1. Does the main topic assertion of each paragraph clearly relate to and support the essay’s overall thesis? (If some don’t, specify those and explain your judgment.)
2. Can you think of a point not mentioned in the essay that would help support the thesis? (If so, specify.)
3. Are the points in the body of the essay arranged in the order of a coherent argument, or would a different order be more effective? Explain.
4. Is there too much re-telling and summarizing of the story, and too little interpretation, analysis, and argumentation from evidence?
5. Are there episodes or passages in the poem relevant to the argument that the author has not used? If so, what are they?

Give your written evaluation back to your partner and discuss your comments.