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Originality, Imitation, and Plagiarism

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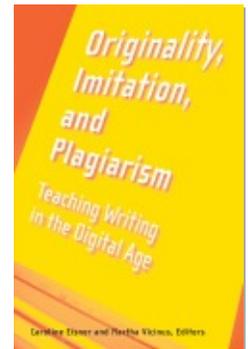
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Do Thesis Statements Short-Circuit Originality in Students' Writing?

Anne Berggren

I decided to take on the issue of thesis statements when I failed a test. It was a test on essay introductions in Diana Hacker's online exercises, and the example that pushed my buttons posed these two possible beginnings and asked which was better:¹

Soft money is the term used for campaign contributions that sidestep laws governing the amount of contributions candidates can get from any one source. Many election campaigns are financed largely with soft money, whether it is raised by the candidates themselves or by their party organizations. Soft money pays for items such as television ads that endorse a political issue rather than a candidate.

Every election year, political parties and candidates raise millions of dollars in soft money, contributions that sidestep laws limiting the amount of money a candidate can receive from any one source. Because unregulated soft money can make winning candidates feel indebted to wealthy donors such as unions and corporations, we must close the undemocratic loopholes in our current campaign finance laws.

I saw more potential in the first beginning. While the second seemed to require more information between the first and final sentence, the first led coherently and specifically into the subject, and I felt a distinct "but" at the end of the passage, implying that in the upcoming paragraph the writer would turn from definition to problem. However, when I selected the first passage I received this rebuke:

Sorry. The opening sentence defines a term instead of engaging the reader's attention. More important, the introduction goes nowhere: It does not assert a thesis to be developed in the rest of the paper.²

An introduction to an essay—academic or otherwise—should indeed engage the reader and set the stage for the intellectual work the writer intends to do. But only in student writing is the writer expected to place at the end of the first paragraph a one-sentence statement of the conclusion the writer is aiming for and then, as students often put it, “prove” that point. Today, students are taught as early as elementary school to use thesis statements, and can arrive at college with several years of practice in mechanical beginnings that encapsulate the argument and often forecast the three or four pieces of evidence that will follow. I wonder, then: Does requiring a thesis at the end of the first paragraph undercut efforts to teach students to try different techniques, to let form follow content, to be creative, even original?

My favorite beginnings do not involve thesis statements. Peter Elbow, for example, in “Reflections on Academic Discourse: How It Relates to Freshmen and Colleagues,” characteristically starts off with a question:

I love what’s in academic discourse: learning, intelligence, sophistication—even mere facts and naked summaries of articles and books; I love reasoning, inference and evidence; I love theory. But I hate academic discourse. What follows is my attempt to work my way out of this dilemma. In doing so I will assume an ostensive definition of academic discourse: it is the discourse that academics use when they publish for other academics. And what characterizes that discourse? This is the question I will pursue here. (135)

Harriet McBryde Johnson, in “Unspeakable Conversations Or How I Spent One Day as a Token Cripple at Princeton University,” her *New York Times Magazine* essay about her discourse with pragmatist philosopher Peter Singer, starts with humor—and provocation:

He insists he doesn’t want to kill me. He simply thinks it would have been better, all things considered, to have given my parents the option of killing the baby I once was, and to let other parents kill similar babies as they come along and thereby avoid the suffering that comes with lives like mine and satisfy the reasonable preferences of parents for a different kind of child. It has nothing to do with me. I should not feel threatened.

Whenever I try to wrap my head around his tight string of syllogisms, my brain gets so fried it’s . . . almost fun. Mercy! It’s like *Alice in Wonderland*. (50)

Indeed, professional writers can consider many options when they are casting around for beginnings: contrasting quotations, personal anecdotes, description of a problem, dialogue, narrative, and so forth. They use these options to produce introductions that identify the subject and direction of an essay without giving away the plot. What students might call the thesis statement (the professional writer might call it the argument) may even be saved until the conclusion, after readers have been prepared by the evidence to accept that position as reasonable.

Perhaps full disclosure of my bias is appropriate here: I didn't learn about thesis statements in college or graduate school or while teaching high school English and history in the 1960s. The term was never mentioned when I wrote for newspapers and did editing for a publishing company and a department of surgery in the 1970s or when I worked for a law firm in the 1980s. And so, in the 1990s, when I began to study composition theory and pedagogy and encountered thesis statements, I didn't find them useful. I attempted to ignore them.

But students today, and their writing teachers, will find it difficult to ignore thesis statements. Every handbook and almost every textbook that I have examined assumes that a thesis statement at the end of the first paragraph is the standard form in college writing.³ At the University of Michigan's Sweetland Writing Center, where I've worked since 1998, approximately a third of students visiting the center check a form saying they want help formulating thesis statements. Most students who have appointments with me assume they must have a thesis statement at the end of the first paragraph—and if I mention that they have other options, they look bewildered.

Further, when I Googled *thesis statement* I got 186,000 hits, including a site for fifth graders (W. W. Norton) that advised them that the thesis statement "The fat content of school lunches is excessive for children" was better than "School lunches suck." (I would have chosen the wrong beginning here, too.) Narrowing my search to *thesis statement and college*, I got 61,500 sites, and most of the first 50 were websites of university writing centers, including those of Indiana, Purdue, North Carolina, Richmond, Wisconsin, Kentucky, Rutgers, Penn, Penn State, Ohio, Harvard, Colorado State, SUNY, and Temple. These sites, too, treat thesis sentences as the default mode in college writing. Indiana University's website notes that "almost all of us . . . look early in an essay for a one- or two-sentence condensation of the argument that is to follow. We refer to that condensation as a thesis statement." The University of Illinois advises students that "everything you

write should develop around a *clear central thesis*. . . . It should appear in the first paragraph."⁴ The University of North Carolina advises students, "Always assume that your instructors expect you to . . . [argue] a position that you set out in a thesis statement" and that "a single sentence somewhere in your first paragraph should present your thesis to the reader."

Why has the thesis sentence become a required element in college writing? Why, when we stress preparing students for any writing contingencies that may come up in jobs or in life, do we confine them to one way, and one way only, of beginning a piece of writing? Where did the thesis statement come from and what accounts for its present popularity?

To seek the origin of thesis statements, I turned to antiquity, since so many categories and methods in the teaching of writing derive from Aristotle and come to us by way of the Roman rhetorician Quintilian, who wrote copiously about teaching rhetoric. Looking up *thesis* in the index of *The Rhetorical Tradition* led me straight to Quintilian's *Institutes of Oratory*, book 2. Back then, however, thesis had a different meaning. *Theses* meant "general questions," in contrast to *hypotheses*, which dealt with specific instances. The *thesis* was an assignment given to young writers on an abstract, either/or topic. Quintilian recommends four: Whether it is better to live in the city or the country; whether a lawyer or a soldier has more merit; whether a man should marry; and whether a man should seek political office. These questions were abstract in the sense that students were to practice pure reasoning rather than attach significance to particular persons, places, or situations (298, 304–5). It struck me that a writer need not have a particular passion for either side in these exercises. He can answer yes or no and simply assemble some evidence in favor of his point. The project is thus a training exercise, what the British refer to as a *dummy run*.

If this ancient precedent is the model for today's thesis statement, one might suspect that today's thesis-driven paper is, at best, a test, a carefully circumscribed way of assessing skills useful in writing, skills such as using evidence, quoting from sources, or synthesizing information. At worst, the model suggests that education is largely ceremonial, and that students are required to enact the ceremony, just as their teachers did before them. In his introduction to Paul Heilker's *The Essay: Theory and Pedagogy for an Active Form*, Derek Owens makes a similar point, arguing that the school paper is not meant to further the student's knowledge, or further the knowledge of anyone else in the field, or convince a wider audience. As he puts it, "The research paper, the exam question, the master's thesis, the dissertation, the professional article, the scholarly book—these are

almost never expected to be catalysts for real change. They are primarily icons" (xi).

Given that Quintilian required theses, I expected to find more of a history for the term.⁵ But I could not find any mention of the word *thesis*, much less *thesis statement*, in my research on the teaching of writing in the eighteenth century, when the textbooks of George Campbell and Hugh Blair ruled the field (Berlin 19–34), and I found the word in only one of the nineteenth-century textbooks and handbooks I actually examined. The one exception was Elias J. MacEwan's *The Essentials of Argumentation* (1899), which defines a thesis as either "a proposition put forward to be supported by argument" or "an argumentative composition embodying the results of original research" (401). Several other nineteenth-century texts use the term *proposition*. Richard Whately, in his 1828 *Elements of Rhetoric*, advises students to state a "proposition or propositions to be maintained" (Berlin 30). Charles William Bardeen, in *A System of Rhetoric* (1884), advises "boys" to begin by indicating their area of interest and proceed to a proposition that can guide their organization. Robert Palfrey Utter, who taught at Amherst, told students in *A Guide to Good English* (1914) that in argument you need a "main proposition," a "definite assertion" or a question—something debatable. The introduction should lead to the "determination of the special issue" (114). I wondered if a proposition was merely an earlier version of a thesis statement, but Utter defines it as any "definite assertion or question" and indicates that it is a step in logic:

Proposition: x is y.

Definition: y is a, b, and c.

If, then, x is a, b, and c, x is y.

Special issue: The question then becomes, is x a, b, and c? (113)

Although none of the above authors specified that the proposition be included in the essay, some early textbook writers did urge students to write out a summary of the argument they intended to make. Thus, James Morgan Hart from Cornell advised in *A Handbook of English Composition* (1895): "Formulate your subject in a complete and clearly-worded sentence, before you begin to write. [You] need not insert [this sentence in the] composition" (451). Frances M. Perry of Wellesley, in *An Introductory Course in Exposition* (1908), asks students to summarize their arguments before they begin writing to insure that they have "a comprehensive view . . . of the subject as [they] intend to treat it" (52). But Charles Sears Baldwin, in his 1906 man-

ual *How to Write*, warned that because an essay “deals with the outside only in order to reveal the inside” (55), its meaning “cannot so often be summed up in a single sentence” (63). Later in the manual, he advised that a “formal opening promises a cold and dry going on” (72).

Rosaline Masson describes two methods of writing an essay in her *Use and Abuse of English: A Hand Book of Composition* (1900). In the didactic method, she says, you would “begin by stating your conclusion and then justifying and illustrating it” (99); in the analytical method, you would “gradually lead the way to [a] conclusion, by giving reason after reason and fact after fact, until you have prepared the mind of the reader to receive . . . the conclusion to which all your arguments have tended” (99). Clarence Dewitt Thorpe of the University of Michigan favors the second of these two options in his 1929 text *College Composition*. “The wrong way to build an argument,” Thorpe says, “is to form a conclusion and then look for facts and reasons to support this conclusion” (418).

The first appearance I have found of the term *thesis* as it is used today occurs in two textbooks published in 1943. John Crowe Ransom states in *A College Primer of Writing* that in argument, “the writer defends or opposes some ‘thesis’ or proposition” (82), and Argus Tresidder, Leland Schubert, and Charles W. Jones, in *Writing and Speaking*, claim that “first, in all argument a thesis must be presented” (381). The idea of presenting a thesis must not have been firmly established, however; Cleanth Brooks, in *Fundamentals of Good Writing: A Handbook of Modern Rhetoric*, published in 1950, never mentions a thesis and advises that an introduction should “state the precise question with which the discussion is to be concerned” (23).

If the idea that students’ papers should present a thesis began in the 1940s, and if thesis statements became the default mode for college writing by, say, the 1980s, my attempt to account for the popularity of thesis statements must focus on what, during those years, would have made this mechanism valuable. Fueled by the GI Bill and the growing number of women seeking higher education, more students, from more varied backgrounds, poured into colleges. To teach these students, colleges turned to adjunct faculty and graduate students, many of whom were not trained in rhetoric. One can imagine that these new teachers needed specific, aptly named, easy-to-teach principles that would help them teach writing. To add support to this notion, Robert J. Connors, in *Composition-Rhetoric: Backgrounds, Theory, and Pedagogy*, points out that somewhere between the 1930s and 1950s, textbooks on writing began to focus on one “master idea” about writing that “should control the way that students learn to write”

(250) and to subordinate the textbook's pedagogical material to that idea. During that same time frame, science rather than the humanities became the dominant influence in the academy, and a more scientific, formulaic approach to writing—one that made students' writing seem more objective and less personal—may have had particular appeal for English departments.

In an e-mail message to the author on September 27, 2005, Margaret Proctor, author of the handbook *Writer's Choice* and coordinator of writing support at the University of Toronto, suggested that standardized tests such as the SATs popularized the use of thesis statements.⁶ "For Canadians," she explained, "the idea of a thesis statement appears only in the 1980s, when universities here started asking for TOEFL scores and sometimes also imposed post-admission writing tests using the convenient form of the 5-paragraph essay." If the SATs precipitated a need in the United States for a form of writing that could be easily assessed, the thesis statement/support form would certainly have benefited both teachers who taught to the test and those who graded it. Furthermore, the thesis limits the discussion, and the more limited the discussion, the more quickly the teacher can judge whether the student made her case.⁷

Beyond these practicalities, however, I think the notion of a "master idea," a thesis statement—one of our most popular handouts speaks of "the Magic Thesis Sentence"—must have a certain resonance in the world today. While writing this essay, I read a *New York Times Magazine* article about George Lakoff's efforts to teach the Democrats to frame their messages using simple unified slogans like the Republicans did in the last election (Bai 2005). Did the Republicans win in 2004 because they disregarded nuance and relied on thesis statements? Asking myself that question, I recalled my students' difficulty in summarizing arguments from the *New York Times Magazine*, *Harper's*, the *New Yorker*, and the *Atlantic Monthly*, as well as guest editorials and op-ed pieces. Students often complain that assigned articles are too hard to understand. They want professional writers to state in the introduction exactly what they are arguing. In other words, if the argument is implied by the preponderance of evidence rather than stated succinctly at the end of the first paragraph, students can't figure out what it is. I began to wonder whether the course of history is now being changed because a generation of citizens has internalized the school ideal that all good writing begins with a thesis statement.

But while I was thinking about unified messages, it occurred to me that corporate memos and e-mails probably benefit from thesis statements that

simplify the message: We need to buy more Burger King stock; I recommend Ramsey for the job. Three points of support for the assertion would undoubtedly follow. Perhaps fads in the teaching of writing—and I like to think of the thesis statement as a fad—happen because a significant technology profits from them.

I'll end with three objections to thesis statements and the thesis/support form:

1. The form makes it too easy for students to do perfunctory work that requires no engagement, creativity, or thought. One student told me he could write a thesis essay in two hours flat and get an A every time. In an article in the *Michigan Daily*, law student Dustin Lee makes a similar claim.⁸

You can write an A-quality essay without any substantive knowledge of the reading. . . . [W]hen it comes time to write a paper, skim the reading material for a few quotes that could reasonably be suggestive of some underlying liberal theme—for example, that *The Red Badge of Courage* is actually about lesbianism—and use these quotes as evidence of the underlying theme. Make sure you emphasize in your paper that “although this topic is not explicitly addressed in the text” your excerpted quotes can reasonably be suggestive of whatever generalized theme you chose. (4)

I do see the practicality of being able to go on automatic pilot, so to speak, to write a paper. While teachers, textbooks, and handbooks may urge students to choose the thesis statement last, after significant research, students are as constrained by time as the rest of us and will opt for efficiency and fit the paper to the thesis if they can.

2. The thesis statement is not a neutral device. It affects content because it controls what you are able to say as well as how you can say it. It assumes a view of knowledge as external and somehow “provable.” This view of knowledge relieves the student of any necessity for generating and reflecting on new ideas, exploring and testing her beliefs, or experimenting with different schemes of arrangement to find an organizational strategy that best suits her project. Her only question becomes, What can I say that I can support?

Isn't the above process profoundly anti-intellectual? Don't we in academia value our willingness to question everything, to suspend belief and seek new possibilities, to recognize that facts change and writers can be seduced by clichés and assumptions?

Heilker, in his book on the essay, proposes a more personal, introspective form as a substitute for the thesis paper because of three qualities summed up by Owens in the introduction:

- The author doubts easy answers and doesn't accept on faith anything that's been said about the subject before;
- The author is willing to venture into unknown territory, rejecting academic answers if necessary; and
- The author is willing to experiment, to trust "chrono-logic" rather than any established form, to let the ideas unfold as they may. (xiii–xiv)

3. Many teachers, including Nancy Sommers,⁹ believe that learning to use thesis statements and provide support is a necessary developmental phase in the training of a young writer. But the work of elementary school teachers such as Lucy Calkins and Robert Graves, middle school teachers such as Nancy Atwell, and many of the teachers associated with the National Writers Project surely shows that students can do quite well without that phase. Certainly, in college, students should have available to them all the techniques and strategies that professional writers are able to use. We, as writing teachers, should encourage them to take advantage of all those door-opening, inquiry-producing, generative tools—in the hope they'll learn to say something deeply reflective, and perhaps original.

Notes

1. Diana Hacker, who died in 2004, was the author of *A Writer's Reference* and *A Pocket Style Manual*, both popular college handbooks published by Bedford/St. Martin's.

2. My session at the website for Diana Hacker's *A Writer's Reference* took place October 5, 2002. The current site, for the sixth edition, is at <http://bcs.bedfordstmartins.com/writersref6e/Player/Pages/Main.aspx>, consulted July 7, 2007.

3. See for example Aaron 17; Hairston et al. 30; Hacker 13; Hodges et al. 50–51; and Faigley 51.

4. Googling the first sentence of this passage brings up forty university and commercial sites that use this exact sentence.

5. Erika Lindemann claims that "we can discover similarities between the five-paragraph theme . . . and formulas the classical rhetoricians proposed for structuring arguments" (38). However, she does not provide examples and I have not been able to establish this relationship.

6. I am grateful to Margaret Proctor for attending my conference session and later

suggesting several new sources. She is directly interested in this topic, having written a book chapter on academic essays, "The Essay as a Literary and Academic Form."

7. When I gave an earlier version of this paper at the Michigan College English Association Conference, respondents told me that ease in grading was their strongest motive for requiring thesis statements. If the thesis sets out a template, the grader needs only to judge how well the paper follows the template.

8. Lee's argument in the article is that University of Michigan teachers shut out conservative views but consider any liberal opinion intelligent. I disagree.

9. Nancy Sommers explained this view in answer to a question I asked during a Sweetland Writing Center workshop at the University of Michigan on October 13, 2000.

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