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Specifics of Teaching Thesis Statement Writing

Abstract

Writing a well-structured text in English requires a good knowledge of the conventions of thesis statement writing. The specific requirements for thesis statement writing should be met and implemented in regard to the four rhetorical modes of writing. Developing students' abilities in writing good thesis statements includes a set of tasks, based on the different types, parts and functions of the thesis statements. The proposed written exercises develop students' critical thinking and help them achieve proficiency in English.

Keywords: essay structure, thesis statement, paragraph, topic, claim.

Introduction

Teaching essay writing is an important part of the school and academic curriculum. It involves different topics in composition theory, which are implemented in written tasks. One of the major topics, which is being discussed in essay writing classes, is essay structure.

The standard model of the English essay is the five-paragraph essay, which consists of an introduction, three body paragraphs and a conclusion. Most often the thesis statement is the last sentence of the introductory paragraph. It presents the main idea of the whole essay. Sometimes a thesis statement develops early and easily; at other times, the true focus of the writing emerges only after you have written your first draft (Rys et al 2018: 45).

The five-paragraph essay model of writing is successfully applied in essay classes with first- to fourth-year Bulgarian students in different degree programmes at the university. The specifics of this type of written text, which are different from the conventions of writing an essay in Bulgarian, are easily acquired by students and improve their style of writing. The model is applied in relation to the four rhetorical modes of writing (description, narration, argumentation, and exposition) and the requirements of structure and form vary in accordance with the definite genre. The process of writing is culture-specific, and students must be well-acquainted with the writing traditions of the different countries. Each language influences how writers express their thoughts and sets a frame of written practices which reveal useful experience.

Specifics of Thesis Statement Writing

“A thesis statement for an essay is like a topic sentence for a paragraph: it names the specific topic and gives the reader a general idea of the contents of the essay” (Oshima, Hogue 2006: 57). According to Wilson and Glazier, a thesis statement must be a sentence with a subject and a verb, and it must convey an idea that you can explain and defend (2018: 236). Moran and Soiferman give the following definition of a thesis statement: “A thesis statement articulates and limits the scope of an essay and usually includes an arguable claim that can be judged on the basis of evidence” (2014: 38). The only difference in concept between the topic sentence and the thesis is one of scope: the topic sentence unifies and controls the content of the paragraph, and the thesis does the same for the essay. Because the essay is longer and more complex than the paragraph, the thesis may suggest a broader scope and may indicate its ideas more explicitly (Brandon, Brandon 2017: 71).

The thesis statement is often referred to as a proposition. It has two parts: a topic and a commentary part. It often lists the subtopics that will be discussed in the body of the essay. A colon (:) is often useful before lists of two, three, or more subtopics in a thesis statement.

The current crisis can be traced to three major reasons. The major points in the series must be parallel. In other words, areas listed in the thesis should be expressed in the same grammatical form.

Locating the main topic and the subtopics in different thesis statements, completing thesis statements by adding subtopics to them, identifying the topic and the viewpoint, and formulating a thesis statement by combining the ideas from two topic sentences are useful exercises referring to the above-mentioned specifications of thesis statement writing.

A thesis statement always expresses an opinion — that is, some judgment based on facts and arguable on the basis of facts. It may be one of the following: a claim about past or present reality: e.g. “In both its space and its equipment, the college’s chemistry lab is outdated;” a claim of value: e.g. “The new room fees are unjustified given the condition of the dormitories;” a recommendation for a course of action, often a solution to a perceived problem: e.g. “Schools and businesses can help to resolve the region’s traffic congestion by implementing car pools and rewarding participants” (Aaron 2014: 118). In formulating arguable claims, the following should not be included as part of the thesis statement because they are not debatable: a neutral statement which gives no hint of the writer’s opinion; an announcement of the paper’s broad subject; a fact, which is not arguable, a truism; a personal conviction that cannot be debated; an opinion based only on feelings; a sweeping generalization (Raimes, Miller-Cochran 2016: 54).

A thesis statement should be clearly worded. It should not include vague language, abstractions, irrelevant details or complex terminology. The language must be concise, clear and accurate, leading the reader to the correct interpretation of the main idea of the essay. Thesis statements are not commands or announce-

ments. Each statement consists of a complete declarative sentence and it presents only one idea.

The thesis statement can also indicate the patterns of organization of the essay: chronological, spatial, logical or compare and contrast. Jane Aaron defines the following functions of a thesis statement: its statement narrows the subject to a single, central idea; it claims something specific and significant about your subject; it conveys some purpose; it often previews concisely the arrangement of ideas, in which case it can also help in organizing the essay. A good thesis statement may also be one or more of the following: a strong, thought-provoking, or controversial statement; a call to action; a generalization needing support or an analytical statement that sets up the structure of the essay (Raimes, Miller-Cochran 2016: 53).

Thesis Statements and Rhetorical Modes of Writing

It is of utmost importance to point out the characteristics of thesis statement writing in relation to the different rhetorical modes of writing. In expository essays the thesis or topic sentence is the general statement that the examples or illustration are intended to support or illustrate. The topic sentence or thesis should present the event or phenomenon that will be analysed, while they announce whether causes, effects, or both will be examined. It names the subject of the definition and makes it apparent that the term will be defined. Sometimes, a thesis statement names the class to which the subject belongs and identifies its particular features that distinguish it from others. In addition, a thesis may reflect the writer's purpose or attitude toward the term. The topic sentence of a paragraph or the thesis of an essay should name the subject; the method; and the categories discussed (Robitaille, Connelly 2007: 131–166).

A thesis statement for a process essay in some way indicates the chronological development of the process. Expressions such as *the process of*, *the procedure for*, *plan*, *develop*, *evolve*, *five stages*, and *several phases* indicate that time order will be used. The thesis statement may even name the steps (Oshima, Hogue 2006: 84).

In example essays the thesis or topic sentence is the general statement that the examples or illustration are intended to support or illustrate. Exemplification is frequently used in non-academic writing situations, such as business reports, memos, and proposals. One of the most important situations for using exemplification is in job application letters (Kirsznner, Mandell 2012: 218).

The thesis statement in a comparison-and-contrast essay indicates if you are making comparisons, contrasts, or both. When you write a thesis statement, specify the controlling idea of the comparison/contrast, and what will be compared or compared contrastively.

In argumentative and interpretative papers, a good thesis statement asserts the writer's position, telling readers that what follows will support that position (Fulwiler 2002). Zarefski (2019) defines the thesis statement of the argumentative essay as the main claim, or resolution that will advance in the essay. The paragraphs

that develop the main idea can be arranged in multiple, convergent, or subordinate patterns (ibid). According to Fahnenstock and Secor (1990), the thesis statement is a claim, a proposition to be supported, which deals with a matter of probability, not a fact or a matter of taste. The audience should be convinced of the thesis statement and the premises that support the thesis (ibid).

The thesis statement in narrative essays presents the subject of the narration and its significance (Robitaille, Connelly 2007). Langan and Winstanley define the thesis statement of a narrative essay as "...some general truth that the conflict or discovery reveals" (2014: 125). The authors further specify the thesis statements for narrative essays as thesis statements focused on change and thesis statements based on an easily understood human truth. An example of the latter is *The value of family is, and should be, an unforgettable lesson* (ibid).

Langan and Winstanley (2014) also elaborate on the specifics of writing thesis statements for descriptive essays. In an expressive descriptive essay, the thesis is the overall response to something or someone, the dominant impression that this person, place, or thing makes on the reader. In the objective descriptive essays, the dominant impression will be a kind of preview statement of the subject.

Types of Thesis Statements

Most of the thesis statements are either explanatory or argumentative. An example of an explanatory thesis statement reads: "Lincoln delayed emancipating any slaves until 1863 because his primary goal was to restore and preserve the Union, with or without slavery" (Aaron 2014: 18). An argumentative thesis statement may be exemplified in the following way: "Drivers' use of cell phones should be outlawed because people who talk and drive at the same time cause accidents" (Aaron 2014: 18).

A further distinction of the types of thesis statements is made by Langan & Winstanley. According to them "there are two main forms of thesis statement: simple and extended" (2014: 27). The topic and the viewpoint statement is called a simple thesis: for example, *Tornadoes are a real threat in Canada*. In extended thesis statements, you include your two supporting points in your thesis. The authors further develop exercises aimed at identifying the two main types of thesis statements:

Change these simple thesis statements to extended statements.

1. The new building on our campus could be more functional if some changes were made.
2. Celebrities make poor role models because of the way they dress, talk, and behave.
3. Working as a security guard can be a stressful experience (2014: 28).

In *Essay Writing Skills with Readings*, Langan and Winstanley develop a similar exercise, aimed at identifying and developing extended thesis statements:

Complete the following extended thesis statements by adding a final supporting point that will parallel the others already provided.

1. Being a successful vegetarian is difficult because cooking meals takes more effort, menu choices in restaurants are limited, and...;
2. A good salesperson needs to like people, to be aggressive, to know the products, to dress appropriately, and...
3. Rather than blaming themselves for failing courses, students blame the instructor, their course load, and even... (2014: 28)

Moore and Cassel (2011) identify the three main parts of a thesis statement: a context, a subject, and a claim. The context locates the reader in the paper's general idea; the subject provides the focus of the paper, and the claim provides an interpretation of the subject. The claim should be debatable, it should not be self-evident, and it should not be a statement of plan or summary.

A Set of Written Tasks Related to Thesis Statement Writing

Useful exercises aimed at fixing problems with the writing of claims may include transforming subjective opinions into objective claims, considering alternative claims, identifying key terms that define the context, subject or claim (adjectives, adverbs, superlatives, introductory clauses), writing an outline, based on a given thesis statement. It is important to stress that in thesis statement writing students should avoid the use of logical fallacies: broad generalization, hasty generalization, false analogy, either-or fallacy, transfer, argument against the person/people, oversimplification, red herring, non-sequitur, begging the question.

Including an arguable proposition that uses a *because* statement to link the claim and the reasons for that claim is another useful exercise that may be implemented in thesis statement writing classes (Moran and Soiferman 2014), e. g.: "It is reasonable to believe that global warming is the result of human activity because (a) global warming seems to correspond with the greenhouse effect, (b) increased carbon emissions contribute to the greenhouse effect, and (c) carbon emissions have increased as a result of human activity" (ibid).

Identifying a topic, fact, or thesis is a useful exercise that develops the critical ability skills of the students, e.g.:

Which of the following are merely topics or facts, and which are statements that you could explain or defend in an essay

1. Gasoline prices are rising again.
2. Animals that seem to be able to predict earthquakes.
3. On July 20, 1969, Neil Armstrong planted an American flag on the moon. (Wilson, Glazier 2018: 237)

Written exercises based on revising may include: paraphrasing thesis statements; revising vague or general thesis statements; choosing the best thesis statement out of a number of sentences; using the thesis statement to draft an introductory paragraph; rewriting factual statements to make them effective thesis statements; revising statements if they contain more than one idea so that each becomes a thesis statement that advances a single main point.

A different group of tasks may include writing thesis statements for the different types of essays; explaining whether a given statement is a simple or an extended thesis statement; identifying key words in a thesis statement and underlining the thesis statements in sample introductory paragraphs.

Useful exercises in evaluating thesis statements may be based on the following model:

Evaluate the following thesis statements, considering whether each one is sufficiently limited, specific, and unified. Rewrite the statements as necessary to meet these goals:

1. Aggression usually leads to violence, injury, and even death, and we should use it constructively.
2. The poem is about motherhood.
3. One evening of a radio talk show amply illustrates both the appeal of such shows and their silliness. (Aaron 2014: 20)

In a five-paragraph essay, the thesis often shows the organization of the essay by giving the main idea of each of the three body paragraphs. This type of thesis, however, does not work as well for longer essays, because if you include the main point of each body paragraph, the thesis statement would become too long (Engkent, Engkent 2017: 22–23). In this case, creative writing written practice proves very successful. Creative thesis statement exercises may include writing a thesis statement based on student's interests. Writing a question whose answer will be the thesis statement of an essay is also a creative way of formulation a written practice. Composing a thesis statement with a figure of speech can be successfully implemented in composition classes teaching description and narration. e.g. *Internet is deeply embedded in the tapestry of everyday life*.

Conclusion

Teaching thesis statement writing includes a thorough investigation on theoretical works and constructing a set of written tasks, based on the theoretical conventions. The implementation of these exercises in writing classes, will lead to developing students' abilities in writing successful essays with well-developed thesis statements. The produced texts will be characterised by a good structure, balanced argumentation and coherent flow of thoughts, which is a good prerequisite to achieving proficiency in English.

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