Formulating an “Argumentative” Thesis

Quick Guide

Introduction

In an argumentative paper, your thesis statement expresses what it is that you want to prove and, ultimately, what you will support with the main arguments in your body paragraphs. Any good thesis statement will:

1.) have a clearly established topic,
2.) make a claim that answers a question about that topic,
3.) have a reason that supports the claim, and
4.) be specific.

The general model of your thesis statement will look something like this:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Claim</th>
<th>Reason</th>
<th>Thesis</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(is)</td>
<td>(because)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</table>

Deciding on a Topic

Ideally, you should write about something that you care about or at least that you have an opinion about. But let’s be honest, we don’t find interest in every subject we come across. If you find yourself in this situation, pick a topic that is controversial; that people don’t see eye to eye on. Picking a topic like this means that you will grab the reader’s attention and establish a clear sense of direction.

Formulating the Question

For argumentative papers, your thesis statement should be an assertive proposition; somebody should be able to either agree or disagree with it. One way to ensure that you’ll come out with an assertive thesis statement is to ask yourself a “yes” or “no” question about your topic.

Answering the Question

Now that you’ve formulated the question, you have to take a side. If you already feel strongly about something, run with it. If you don’t feel particularly compelled to either side of an argument, don’t worry. You should take some comfort knowing that because there is often times a lot of grey area, there are a lot of interesting points that can be made for either side. If you run into this problem, take a chance and see where it takes you. After answering “yes” or “no” you need to shape your response into a claim and then support it with a reason.

Specificity

Teachers will tell you that your thesis statement needs to be specific but this is a very subjective and sometimes unhelpful instruction. And so because it’s not altogether easy to define, perhaps the better question is, “How do I make my thesis specific?” To a large extent, making your thesis specific will depend upon how much reading and studying you’ve done on the topic. The more you read and understand the subject matter, the more precise and detailed questions you’ll be capable of asking.

Nonetheless, it’s important that you consult your professor or a tutor on this. Sometimes, we may feel that our subject is adequately narrow but a second set of eyes will help to sheer away some of
the excess. Don’t be ashamed of asking for help and don’t be afraid of rejecting your old ideas for new ones. In the end, you’ll find that working in dialogue with others can really improve your writing skills.

Example

Let’s say you’re taking a psychology class and you decide to write on the subject of Freud. Let’s go through the steps.

1. **Decide on a topic** – Freud as an individual, of course, is much too broad of a topic and not controversial so maybe we could pick one of his ideas, like his theory of the unconscious.

2. **Formulate a question** – Freud’s theory about the unconscious is a subject of great controversy in the field of psychology. Many believe that the idea of repression tied up with the notion of the unconscious fails to account for mental illness as Freud thought it did. Thus, the unconscious’s relation to mental illness is something we can formulate into a question: Does the unconscious adequately account for mental illness?

3. **Answer the Question** – In our research, we may find ultimately that we agree with Freud’s detractors. Some would say that Freud’s theory doesn’t adequately account for mental illness because it fails to take into account that some conditions are not caused by repression of the unconscious but by chemical imbalances in the brain. So ultimately, we will answer “no,” to our question. And, as stated above, when we answer the question, we don’t want to return with just a “yes” or “no” but to provide the sense in which we’re disagreeing (i.e. Freud’s theory fails in accounting for mental illness) and then providing a reason (i.e. because it fails to account for biologically based mental illnesses). Put all together: **No, Freud’s theory fails in accounting for mental illness because it doesn’t account for conditions that have a biological basis.**

After this, we have all the raw materials for our thesis statement. If I use the structure at the beginning and piece everything together (topic, claim, reason), I get the following:

> Freud’s theory of the unconscious is inadequate in accounting for mental illness because it fails to account for conditions that are of a strictly biological origin.

Now, we have a thesis! Of course, you don’t have to stop there. You may find in more reading and studying that you want to make your statement even more specific. Writing is a process and one that isn’t always linear (in fact, it rarely is). This means that you’ll probably go back to redefine your thesis statement a few times and that’s okay! Best of luck!