Understanding Thesis Statements

Not as easy as you might think!

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Why is understanding thesis statements important for students?

• If absent, student essays tend to:
  – lack purpose, direction and organisation;
  – be descriptive rather than analytical;
  – miss the point of what’s expected of an essay.
• Students will lose marks unnecessarily if marking criteria ask for one.

Why do I think there is a significant problem? (pre-quiz)

• Results from IAP diagnostic pre-quiz run over several years. Does it have a thesis? (2011-2 results)
  a. This essay will examine the benefits and problems associated with the operation of international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) in developing countries and will argue whether or not the governments in those countries should allow INGOs to continue operating. 21 yes / 24 no
  b. The development of a truly effective treatment for schizophrenia depends on first understanding its cause. In relation to this question, it will be argued that there is strong evidence that genetic factors can increase your propensity to develop schizophrenia, but whether you do or don’t seems to be determined by environmental stressors. 25 yes / 20 no

Why do I think there is a significant problem? (post-quiz)

• Results from IAP review post-quiz run over several years. Does it have a thesis? (2011-2 results)
  a. Concerns about global warming have led to debates about the best ways for governments to encourage businesses, industry and individuals to take action to reduce the greenhouse gas emissions associated with their activities. This essay will compare and contrast the Australian Labor government’s proposal to introduce a carbon tax with the Liberal opposition’s “direct action” approach of providing rebates for the uptake of solar panels, investment in tree planting, and purchasing CO₂ abatements off businesses and so on. 23 yes (42%) / 32 no
  b. Despite the tremendous successes of modern science and its all-pervasive influence on modern life, surveys have revealed that many people find the ideas of science difficult to grasp or believe and feel alienated by what they perceive science to be all about (refs.). It will be argued that this should not be too surprising by making a case that science is in fact a very unnatural enterprise, both in terms of the type of thinking required and because the findings of science are often at odds with what common sense tells about how the natural world works. 43 yes / 12 no (22%)

Background to the next two slides

• IAP = intensive 5 week academic preparation program run prior to each semester for AusAID sponsored students, mostly studying at the masters coursework level.
  Groups of ~100 at the start of the year, ~40 mid-year.
• Pre-quiz = diagnostic quiz on academic expectations run in first week of program.
• Post-quiz run in last (fifth) week of program with a very similar question set.
• A major focus of the program is on academic writing expectations and an argumentative essay is a major assessment piece due in week 4.

Why do I think there is a significant problem? (3)

• O-Week sessions with mostly domestic students also show a significant fraction can’t pick which intro has a thesis and which doesn’t, even after instruction!
  • Several LAs teach in the IAP and the problem is not just restricted to my class!
  • All this suggests that more than just a “clear” explanation is required.
So what’s the problem? Is it simply ignorance?

Which of the following correctly defines what is meant by the "thesis" of an essay? (2011-1 results -- program disrupted by Brisbane floods)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Pre-Quiz (N = 98)</th>
<th>Post-Quiz (N = 133)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a. An essay writer’s thesis is the list of topics, issues or questions which will be addressed in the body of the essay.</td>
<td>13.3%</td>
<td>3.76%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. An essay writer’s thesis is their point of view about the issue they discuss. In other words, when an essay’s topic is phrased as a question, an author’s thesis is their short answer to the question which is justified, defended and elaborated on in the body of the essay.</td>
<td>53.1%</td>
<td>71.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. Both (a) and (b) are definitions of a thesis. [Any statement of purpose]</td>
<td>19.4%</td>
<td>21.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d. Neither (a) nor (b) are adequate definitions of a thesis.</td>
<td>14.3%</td>
<td>3.76%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

So what’s the problem? Is it simply ignorance? (2)

E.g. Concerns about global warming – This essay will compare and contrast the Australian Labor government’s proposal to introduce a carbon tax with the Liberal opposition’s “direct action” approach of providing rebates for the uptake of solar panels, investment in tree planting, and purchasing CO\textsubscript{2} abatements off businesses and so on.

- Of 95 students who chose correct thesis definition in post-quiz, 41 said this introduction “contained the writer’s thesis” (and only 12 correctly identified the 2 out of 4 examples which had a thesis).
- Conclusion: Knowing a definition ≠ understanding.

So what’s the problem? Is it simply ignorance? (3)

- One year, discussion following pre-quiz seemed to have sorted out the confusions based on a show of hands on follow-up questions.
- One week later, quiz on Blackboard revealed a significant fraction had reverted to original thinking.
- This suggests students come in with strong pre/(mis)-conceptions which are resistant to change.
- ~50% of 2011-2 cohort had done an EAP before coming to Australia, so should have been taught about thesis statements.

So what’s the problem? Is it simply a failure to clearly distinguish between the two different types of “statements of purpose”? (4)

Statement of purpose types in essay intros:

- a. to answer the set question(s)
  - “This essay will address the question of …”
  - “This essay will compare and contrast …”
  - “This essay will discuss X, Y and Z,”
- b. to defend an answer (thesis) to the set question(s)
  - “In relation to this question, it will be argued that …”

- Conjecture: I suspect that many students have “learned” that you state your thesis in your intro and because they conclude their intros with a restatement of the assignment brief, they have come to believe (a) constitutes a thesis statement.
- Much evidence indicates it’s not as simple as that thought

Conjectures on reasons for misconceptions:

- Incorrect prior teaching
  - An Indonesian student once was adamant that he’d been taught in his EAP that, “This essay will discuss X, Y and Z,” is an example of a thesis statement.
  - A new LA at UQ who has taught in EAP programs has confirmed that the materials in the program did the same.
  - I have seen learning sites which give, “This essay will discuss X, Y and Z,” as an example of a thesis statement.
- Not picked up for not having a thesis
  - Many students may have started previous essays with a restatement of the topic brief and not told this is not a thesis statement leading them to think that what they are doing is okay.

Conjectures on reasons for misconceptions:

- Rules tend to overgeneralise at first?

Literacy Education Online\textsuperscript{1} thesis statement definition:

“A thesis statement in an essay is a sentence that explicitly identifies the purpose of the paper or previews its main ideas.”

- But, “This essay will discuss X, Y and Z,” fits the first the first part of the definition (and the second too with some fuzzy thinking).
- Educational consequence: Instruction should consider non-examples as well as examples.

\textsuperscript{1} http://leo.tirou.edu/acadwrite/thesisstatement.html
Is it as simple as that?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Intro Bb Quiz (2011–1)</th>
<th>What is a thesis?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(a) List of topics to address</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Does it have a thesis?</td>
<td>Yes (Y)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Red numbers: at face value, choice is inconsistent with chosen definition. But choices often do NOT reveal any consistent (simple) pattern either!
* = correct answers

Reasons for errors: (2) “Fuzzy” thinking

• Some student explanations for choices suggest a poor discrimination between:
  – “the intro suggests the writer has a point of view”
  – E.g. “This essay will examine the benefits and problems associated with the operation of international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) in developing countries and will argue whether or not the governments in those countries should allow INGOs to continue operating.”
  – and, “the intro tells you what that point of view is”

Reasons: (3) “Fuzzy” thinking / weak language / invisibility of important auxiliary words

Some students read,
  a. “argues whether or not x is helpful for...” as
  b. “argues that x is helpful for ...”
  • Conjecture: this may be exacerbated in situations where (b) is what the student thinks would be the answer.

Reasons for rejecting introductions which actually do contain a thesis statement

• “It reads like a body paragraph.”
• “It reads like a conclusion.”
• “It seems like a complete answer already, not an introduction to an extended argument about some issues.”
  • Conclusions:
  – Expectation is that you don’t give your answer (conclusion) in your introduction!
  – Blind to significance of linguistic clues? (e.g. “will argue” vs “this shows” vs “have shown”) (cf. “lexical invisibility hypothesis”).
  – Not alert to absence of references which would be needed to support a claim made in a body paragraph?!
  • Would exercises raising awareness of the signs that differentiate intros from body paras from conclusions help?

Other reasons for rejecting introductions which actually do contain a thesis statement

• Thesis “too strong”:
  • “It seemed too clear cut / proven to be a thesis.”
  • “It sounds like a fact rather than an opinion.”
  • Which is right to the extent that you can’t have a thesis about a fact.
• Thesis “too weak”:
  • “The writer should take one side or the other.”
  • Demonstrates lack of awareness that things are rarely “black or white”
  • Though background knowledge might make an influence here.

The importance of background knowledge?

Does it contain the writer’s thesis?
Topic: Diversity: help or hindrance to group performance?
  • Background: Regarding this issue, it will be argued in this essay that diversity in terms of things like knowledge, skills and experience is potentially helpful, but will only be so if managed well, while diversity in terms of things like attitudes towards time management and the assessment task will most likely be a hindrance to successful group performance.
  • 2011–1: 77 yes / 21 no (21%)
  • 2011–2: 37 yes / 4 no (10%)
  • Second group had done a writing exercise the previous week looking at excerpts from the literature which supports the stated thesis.
Understanding Thesis Statements

An illustration of the complexity of the problem of understanding student thinking

- 2011-1 IAP cohort
- Identify a correct definition of a thesis (4 choices)
- Identify which of 4 introductions included the author’s thesis (2 of the 4 did).
- There were 31 different combinations of answers – definition + list of intros containing a thesis – from 133 students!
- Conclusion: Student answers highly context-dependent!

More thoughts on how to improve student learning: Teaching Experiments

- Peer instruction coupled with teacher instruction:
  - After clarifying what correct definition is, give intro example which know will polarise group.
  - Get neighbours to argue with each other over what is the right answer.
  - Check group has (mostly) converged on right answer.
- Seemed to work outstandingly well first time tried (though quiz a week later showed a lot of reversion)
- Mixed results second time tried (did different examples contribute to that?)

Teaching Experiments (2)

- To counter reversion, follow up quizzes reminded students that many had wrong ideas (though didn’t tell them right definition) before asking questions.
  - Worked quite well first time tried
  - Modest success second time tried 😊

Research lessons

- Knowing a definition ≠ understanding.
- Students can get the right answer for the wrong reasons.
- Students can get the wrong answer for the “right” reasons.
  ⇒ a need to triangulate!
  ⇒ Need to ask not only, “does it have a thesis?” but also, “what do you think the thesis is?”
- A whole range of different concepts can be triggered by questions of this type, leading to seemingly inconsistent answers.
  ⇒ a need to triangulate!

Research lessons: Need to ask students what they think the thesis statement is

One of the World Health Organisation’s four key planks to reducing mortality due to cancer is “early detection.” ... Despite the sense of such approaches in general, the Cancer Council of Australia currently recommends against Australia adopting a population-based screening approach for the detection of prostate cancer in older men. The purpose of this essay is to evaluate the Cancer Council’s reasons for this recommendation and to assess whether recent advances in detection techniques and overseas experience with population-based screening warrant a re-evaluation of this recommendation.

8/45 students in 2011-2 cohort identified this as the thesis statement. Thesis = issue?

Conclusions

- A significant fraction of international students, and perhaps domestic students too, do not have a clear and accurate conception of what constitutes a thesis statement.
- A common misconception seems to be that a thesis statement is a statement of purpose, including a statement that the essay will just do what the assignment brief required.
- Actual thesis statements are commonly rejected as being “conclusions” or “body paragraphs” suggesting students are not picking up on lexical markers which distinguish intros from body paragraphs from conclusions.
- Misconceptions are resistant to change ... previous views quickly reassert themselves in many students.
Some Relevant References

- How students’ prior knowledge can affect their learning:
  - See for example, Ch. 1 of: S. A. Ambrose et al. (2010), How Learning Works: Seven Research-Based Principles for Smart Teaching (Jossey-Bass, San Francisco).