

DEVELOPING AN EFFECTIVE THESIS STATEMENT IN ACADEMIC WRITING

CZU: 802.0

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Abstract: *Articolul dat se acsează pe dezvoltarea deprinderilor de scriere a propoziției sentențioase, ce prezintă mesajul dominant al unui eseu. Sînt expuse cerințele și principiile de bază pentru propoziția sentențioasă, precum subiectul,*

scopul, nucleul, limbajul specific și subdiviziunile principale ale eseului. Articolul include, de asemenea exemple de propoziții sentențioase, finalizînd cu descrierea tehnicii de dezvoltare a unei propoziții sentențioase începînd cu varianta inițială pînă la versiunea finală deplină.

Key words: *thesis statement, writing skills, essay, subject, purpose, focus, specific language, major subdivisions, technique of development, preliminary draft, final draft.*

One of the most difficult skills to develop in academic essay writing is producing an effective thesis statement. Quite often in their writing students cannot keep track of the main idea, or go off the essay's topic. As a result, their essays become vague and blurred. A frequent reason for this is the inability to develop an appropriate thesis statement that would help student writers to focus on the issue discussed in the essay. For example, if students have to develop the idea that children are the reflection of their parents' values, conduct and attitudes, they shouldn't necessarily present a description of their parents' general appearances in the essay. It is not decisive in this case whether they are good-looking or attractive, whether they are tall or short, or whether they are casually or well-dressed. Instead, students should focus on their parents' special qualities and merits, such as honesty, courage, modesty, integrity, etc. and various achievements that make the parents good models for their children. In other words, all information presented should support the reason for writing the essay which must be stated at the beginning in the thesis statement.

A thesis statement is the central message, or the focus of an essay. It is proof that the writer has something specific to communicate about the topic and by the means stated, it is the strongest and clearest statement in the essay. An effective thesis statement prepares the reader for the most important of what the writer intends to cover in an essay. As for a student writer, he/she should create a thesis statement attentively in order to reflect the message of his/her essay. The thesis statement usually consists of one sentence and is presented at the end of the introductory paragraph. (If the material covered in the essay is longer the thesis statement may consist of two sentences). Identifying the central message at the beginning will help to focus on the topic of the essay and to keep the line of thinking.

Lynn Q. Troyka singles out five basic requirements for a thesis

statement (Troyka 1996). It must state the essay's *subject* (topic of discussion). It must reflect the essay's *purpose*, depending on the type of essay (informative, descriptive, persuasive, etc.). The thesis statement must also include a *focus* – a claim that conveys the writer's point of view. At the same time, a thesis statement requires *specific language*. General words should be avoided. Student writers are encouraged to use precise nouns, strong verbs and vivid modifiers in writing their thesis statements. Ultimately, a most common thesis statement briefly states the *major subdivisions* of the essay's topic.

In order to develop an effective thesis statement, as stated in *Glencoe Writer's Choice*, student writers are advised to ask themselves questions about their topic. They are to focus on a specific aspect of the subject and “then condense the subject to a basic statement”. (*Glencoe Writer's Choice* 2001: 18).

Some authors define a thesis statement as a sentence that presents the *purpose* of the essay. Sheridan Blau says: “A thesis statement is a sentence that explains the purpose of your writing” (Blau et alia 1992: 275). Joy M. Reid defines a thesis statement as “one sentence that gives the purpose of the essay” (Reid 1988: 48). Indeed, clarifying the purpose in everything we do helps us to concentrate on that very thing and have a correct approach to it and deal with it easier. In daily life people write for particular purposes. We write messages to give the latest information about ourselves, to explain the reason of our acting in this or the other way. Often we try to convince our friends or colleagues of something, or, we explain our opinion of some new things or of certain events. In the same way, in academic writing students will probably write with more precision and effectiveness after deciding on the exact purpose. Students' options in this respect may vary. As it has been mentioned above, they can depend on the type of essay students are writing. These can be: providing information, describing people or places, narrating an event (or events), explaining a process, comparing and contrasting something, giving an opinion, or persuading an audience. Thesis statements in longer essays may include more than one of the stated purposes. For instance, a student may write about an opinion and try to convince his/her readers to support his/her idea. Student writers must be clear about their intention (purpose) in writing.

At the same time, the thesis statement *shouldn't* be presented in a

simple sentence. For example, the sentence *Mrs. Heartright has three cats and a parrot* is not a thesis statement. A simple statement of fact needs no development. But the thesis statement may express a *point of view* that a student writer can define and argue in the essay. For example, the simple sentence presented above, may be developed into a thesis statement: *Mrs. Heartright keeps three cats and a parrot which bring a lot of happy moments and make her lonely life meaningful*. Reading this sentence one can easily predict what the writer is going to say about further in the essay.

Also, the thesis statement *cannot be* expressed in a question, because *a question* contains no judgement or opinion. The response to the question can be developed into a thesis statement.

Depending on the type of essay the thesis statement may contain *controlling ideas* that are usually reflected in the topic sentences of the developmental paragraphs of the essay. This is typical for argumentative essays, for example:

Rising crime rates, increasingly overcrowded conditions, and growing expenses make living comfortably in a modern city difficult. (Troyka 1996: 36)

Deceptive advertising can cost consumers not only money but also their health. (Troyka 1996: 36)

These are good versions of thesis statements. They state the essay's topic, reflect its purpose, include the writer's point of view, use specific language and concisely state the major subdivisions (controlling ideas) of the essay's subject.

Below is a sample of an introductory paragraph of a comparative-contrast essay with the title *Childhood in War and Peace*. The thesis statement presented at the end of the introductory paragraph clearly directs to the ideas discussed further in the body paragraphs of the essay.

Historical events change children's lifestyles. Some children lead carefree lives while others have no childhood at all. For example, my mother spent her childhood when there was a war in my country, Poland, but I did not spend my childhood during wartime. Therefore, my mother's childhood and mine were the opposite; our schooling and our activities after school show the dramatic differences in our lives. (Reid 1988: 65)

Thus, an effective thesis statement is a result of *choice, focusing* and *specific opinion*. A student writer must learn how to develop progression

from a basic assertion to a final thesis statement. For example, a student writes an explanatory essay choosing the *Bible* as the subject. He/she might progress in reaching a successful thesis statement for the essay in the following way:

A. *The Bible is useful.* - This is a simple statement and it cannot be developed with concrete, specific support.

B. *The Bible is a useful book for us.* - This is also a simple statement and is still too general.

C. *The Bible is one of the best books in the world.* - This statement is a bit more specific, but still there is much generalization.

D. *The Bible is one of the most significant books in the history of mankind.* - This is a better variant - it is more narrowed (focused) and it uses more exact language. However, an additional, more specific idea would control the essay more plainly.

E. *The Bible is one of the most significant books in the history of mankind, it is the foundation for the ethics of millions of people.* - This variant of thesis statement is rational, it states a specific opinion that can be supported and developed further in the essay.

Concluding, it must be remarked that until a student has written more drafts of the whole essay, the initial formulation of the thesis statement might not precisely reflect what he/she discusses in the essay. In the first draft the student is advised to make a claim, i.e. a sentence that states the topic of the essay and the purpose of writing it, even if the writer may not make a concrete decision about it until later. The formulation of the first assertion will not be the same in the final draft. It may evolve and change in the course of revising, but it will serve as a focus, it will help to keep the issue in mind as the student writer progresses from an initial thesis statement to a completely developed one.

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