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Let's End Thesis Tyranny

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By Bruce Ballenger

Many of my first-year college students have been battle-trained in writing thesis statements by the time I get them. But rather than opening doors to thought, the thesis quickly closes them. Instead of offering a guiding hand, the thesis carries a baseball bat, muscling its way into writers' thoughts and beating information into submission.

What I'm talking about is the thug thesis, the bully who hangs with the five-paragraph theme and similar forms of deductive writing. Unfortunately, this thesis—an anathema to academic inquiry—is the one most students know best.

I'm not arguing against teaching students how to write a thesis statement. What bothers me is how thoroughly this convention dominates our discussions about what is meant by strong academic writing. The thesis has been hogging the bed, and it's time to make more room for its tossing-and-turning partner in academic inquiry: the question.

The literary critic Keith Fort claimed that academic essays requiring a thesis that must be proved ultimately limit what students can write about, since "the only ideas that are acceptable are those that can be proved." This, in turn, fundamentally shifts writers' relationships to the texts they're writing about: Information is necessarily subordinated to the master idea, and the paper is arranged hierarchically. As Fort put it, "If the only form in which a writer can express himself [sic] on literature is one that requires a thesis, then he has to look at literature as a source of theses." It follows that any text, not just literary ones, is diminished when its sole function is to be a mine for evidence that supports a thesis.

Of course, there are situations in which dreaming up a thesis early on is a good idea—say, for essay exams and the GRE. But the habit of rushing to judgment short-circuits genuine academic inquiry. Scholars might well have a hunch about what is true—we might even have a hypothesis—but what motivates us is the act of discovery, of coming to see things differently. In contrast, the thug thesis wields the mallet in the arcade game whack-a-mole—determined to keep discovery in its place: out of sight.

The thesis essay is also a form of deductive reasoning that is best suited to what scholars call "well-defined problems," or problems in which there is likely a "correct and knowable solution." Yet the subject matter in our classes rarely, if ever, fits that definition. If anything, students are writing about ill-defined, complicated problems that might raise questions with multiple answers, none of them necessarily "correct."

The kind of reasoning skills that ill-defined problems demand are much more likely to involve induction rather than deduction. Any final judgment is delayed until the evidence is examined. And when we do come to a conclusion, we arrive at a hypothesis, not an assertion like a thesis, which implies a final judgment. In other words, we let the moles pop up, and then we take a look at them before we even think about whacking them.

So we need to teach students what makes a good question, one that will sustain writing and inquiry over time.

When we explore anything we want to know more about, we first ask questions of fact or definition: What is known about this, or what is this? A student curious about the impact of melting sea ice on polar bears will probably start by asking what people have already said about it. While these are important questions to ask, if students go no further than questions of fact or definition, they write encyclopedic reports on their topics, which is usually not what we're after in college writing.

Yet these questions do provide a working knowledge of a subject, which in turn produces good inquiry questions, and so we must encourage students to ask them. Then we must push students to craft the types of questions that might lead to them to have something to say about the effects of climate change on polar bears, say, or Socrates' position on the nature of knowledge, or whatever they're writing about.

Good inquiry questions are about value (how good is it?), policy (what should be done?), interpretation (what does it mean?), hypothesis (what is the best explanation?), and, perhaps most of all, relationships (what is the relationship between x and y?). Imagine question-asking as an ability, like so many others, that is on a developmental arc: We necessarily begin by acquiring working knowledge of a subject before we can discover the questions that might lead to discovery.

While good inquiry questions might eventually produce a thesis statement, they might also raise additional questions or more-tentative conclusions. That is why we should make room for the essay along with the argumentative paper in our classes. The essay in its original form may have had a thesis, but it was often a delayed one, and even then, it wasn't really a thesis but a tentative judgment: This is what I know now.

This form of essay encourages a different—even contrasting—system of thought than the conventional academic paper. It relies far more on induction than deduction, and it expands rather than limits what one can write about. Freed from the imperative to prove, writers can take on any topic, even when they don't know what they think about it.

Open-ended, exploratory, and driven by the desire to discover rather than to prove, the essay is most likely to teach not only the power of good questions but also the reward of withholding judgment: the pleasure of discovery. To do this, we need to wrestle with the bully thesis, and urge our students to substitute a question for the baseball bat.

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