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Asking Questions, Generating Ideas

An Idea Worth Writing about

Individual members of a discourse community (such as college or your writing class) agree about many issues but also disagree about other issues of mutual interest. When there is mutual interest, when members of the community care about whether an issue is resolved, disagreement is what creates the need to look for and use ways to cooperate, and the need to reason toward the best possible answer to shared questions. You are engaged in such an inquiry whenever you talk to anyone about a problem you share and try to reason together toward a solution. You are engaged in argumentative writing whenever you use writing to respond (whether formally or informally) to a difference of opinion, trying to find support for what you think is a good answer.

The word *argument* itself can be an obstacle to engaging in the process of reasoned inquiry I am inviting you to practice in this book, because that term is also used to identify a cultural phenomenon that emphasizes emotional and threatening debate over rational dialogue. In her book, *The Argument Culture: Moving from Debate to Dialogue*, Deborah Tannen argues that a warlike atmosphere in our culture leads us to see all issues in terms of polarized sides, or strictly pro and con positions.* This tendency produces an adversarial frame through which ideas are debated. We are all familiar with programs in which representatives of opposing viewpoints shout their conclusions at each other, not listening to each other's arguments and, indeed, not really offering arguments, just declarations. Whether on radio or television, in print, or over the Internet, we have seen debates take the form of verbal violence. And we often talk as though our debates are violent by definition: the war on drugs, the battle of the sexes, the cable wars. Complex issues of public concern are often reduced

to only two sides, each of which is seen as trying to destroy the other. The common assumption informing this phenomenon, Tannen argues, is that opposition is seen as the best way to get to the truth. But, as Tannen explains, this oppositional frame can pose problems when it becomes interpreted in terms of winning and losing. Victory over the opposition becomes more important than mutual understanding and collaborative inquiry. When argument is more about winning than about seeking solutions to problems, Tannen argues, everyone loses. In her book, Tannen advocates a change in cultural values, placing the value of engaging in dialogue over the value of winning a debate.

I certainly agree with Tannen's attempt to redefine what the term *argument* suggests when we hear it used in public forums. It is important to our culture to seek dialogue to get at the truth, and opposition is not the best way to do it if the word *opposition* is associated dialectically with *war* or *violence*. But in another sense opposition is a vital part of our diverse society, and in our debates *is* the best way to get at the truth, because without opposition there are no questions to be answered or differences to be resolved. We cannot do away with opposition, nor would we want to in a tolerant society. We must engage it. But *how* we respond to opposition and use it in our communication with each other is up to us. When I described the interplay of dualisms in my discussion of dialectic in Chapter 3, I was not referring to armies of opposed thinkers using words as weapons to destroy each other, but to the way we must use language creatively to construct bridges to agreement. The word *argument* in the context of argumentative writing in college does not mean a verbal battle between opponents, each of whom desires to silence the other. It means, instead, the search for reasons that will bring about cooperation among people who differ in how they view ideas but who nevertheless need to discover grounds for agreement. Argumentative writing, then, may be seen as a process of *reasonable inquiry into the best grounds for agreement between a writer and an audience who have a mutual concern to answer a question*.

This definition is not confined to the academic essay, of course. You have probably written arguments in letters or other informal situations whenever you felt the need to explain or support your ideas. The argumentative *essay* (the word comes from the French for "attempt") is a more formal composition that attempts to deal reasonably with significant ideas. It is the form that college writing usually takes, simply because in an essay a writer encounters ideas directly, for the sake of coming to a new understanding. By writing essays, you can explore significant ideas for the sake of coming to earned conclusions. But this process goes on in college for the sake of a larger aim: to help you deal reasonably with diverse ideas wherever you may encounter them.

A significant idea is not necessarily any idea that you happen to come up with. Some ideas are so conventional that they cannot be said to be ours. Some are trivial. Some might seem like good ideas for a moment but turn out to be silly after a bit of thought. Ideas of these kinds occur to everyone. But when we set out to *write* about an idea, it is generally not one of these. We write because

*For an in-depth look at these ideas, see Deborah Tannen's *The Argument Culture: Moving from Debate to Dialogue* (New York: Random House, 1998).

we have an idea that is worth writing about. Such an idea is one that the writer thinks should matter to other people and that the writer cares enough about to discuss. This means that the writer also thinks that others can be led to share the idea and that the writer, therefore, accepts the burden of communication. If an idea is worth writing about, it must be worth communicating effectively.

Ideas in Context: Audience

Ideas worth writing about do not exist in a vacuum: Writing—even in a diary—is meant to be read, and writers imagine their words entering into dialogue with readers when they sit down to write. As I type these words, I focus on the question that governs the beginning of any writing process: Who is my audience and what is our shared concern? You know that in order to communicate an idea effectively, you need to consider your audience. But have you ever thought about the possibility that you need to consider your audience in order to know what your ideas *are*?

Any idea you choose to argue is to some degree determined by your audience, those members of your discourse community whom you are addressing in your writing. The intention of any piece of argumentative writing combines what the writer has to say and what the audience needs to hear. What is at issue for the audience and the writer both? You are free, of course, to choose to argue anything you like, in an absolute sense, but it is only when you find your audience that you really face the necessity of reasoning well. If I were to argue that “A moon colony should be used for the purpose of manufacturing perfect golf balls” to an audience that in no way cares whether I am right or wrong, then it would hardly matter whether I based my case on good or bad reasons. (Remember Alice and the Cheshire Cat?) But if I argue it in a situation where some people believe that moon colonies should not be used for commercial purposes or that perfect golf balls are a useless commodity, then the reasons I choose will make all the difference in whether I am listened to or not.

Your knowledge of your audience can never be complete, of course. Not only does an audience usually consist of more than one person having more than one set of interests and beliefs, but audiences may also consist of people who are entirely unknown. The question of who constitutes an audience is not a simple one, nor should it be made to seem simple. It is one of those matters about which you need to make a judgment, using whatever knowledge there is, without being able to arrive at certainty. You do not have to think of your audience as particular people with individual characteristics, nor do you have to invent imaginary readers who function as mere “straw men” to be blown over by incomplete reasoning. You can write, instead, to a more general audience, assumed to be made up of people who share your argumentative situa-

tion, who share the question at issue, and who are capable of reasoning in response to your assertions. Whether you think of this general audience as an extension of the beliefs of a particular person or as a composite of possible points of view, the relevant characteristics of that audience are characteristics that somehow make a difference for how the argument is conducted. If you were arguing about your right-to-life stance, for instance, you would probably not think about the relevant characteristics of your audience in terms of hair color or nationality, but you might think of your readers in terms of religious beliefs or social class.

When you write for an audience, you take on a kind of obligation to that audience that does not exist if you write simply for yourself or if you write just for your instructor or for a grade. We have all done this kind of writing, and it can be valuable—but to write without an audience can often feel as though you are writing without a purpose. Once you have an audience in mind, your purpose is clear: You write for an audience that shares your concerns (but perhaps not your views).

Writing in the context of a discourse community is a social act: You use language to explore issues of common concern and to share the results of your inquiry into those issues. In this sense, the audience is really the invisible component to a well-formed argument, because the concerns and commitments of the audience determine the kind of question you will address. In a discourse community, ideas are put forward in response to questions that arise for that community.

Stasis

It may seem strange to think about a thesis as a response to a question, but if you think about writing as a social act, as a way of entering into discussion about an issue, then the idea that a thesis responds to a question may begin to make more sense. As members of any number of discourse communities, we constantly face questions which we must think about before we respond. The questions we confront as members of communities take many shapes: Is assisted suicide really murder? Does bilingual education slow the process of assimilation for non-English-speaking public elementary students? Should property taxes be raised to fund higher education? Is Hamlet’s decision to avenge his father’s death a good one? These are not simple questions by any means, but they are worth writing about when they reflect the concerns of particular communities.

Questions like these do not have ready (or easy) answers: They require careful (and sometimes difficult) thought from the members of the communities to which they are posed. Clearly, not all community members would respond to these questions in the same way. As a property owner, I may not like the idea that my taxes could be raised to support local schools. If I have children

who attend those schools, my attitude may be different. And what if I am a teacher in a public school? As you can see, a single question may lead me to consider several positions from within my own discourse community, questions that ultimately will help shape my response to the question, Should property taxes be raised to fund higher education?

Questions like these are said to be *at issue* because to answer them requires inquiry into grounds for shared assent. Different kinds of questions call for different kinds of answers and for answers that take different shapes.

Stasis: Kinds of Questions at Issue

The kind of thesis that you compose and use as the basis for your essay will depend on the kind of question that is at issue for you and your audience. Whether a question is at issue depends on the particular situation you are in when you feel compelled to state your case. To understand this situation, it helps to know what sort of question really separates you and your audience, because if the situation calls for you to answer one kind of question and you answer another kind instead, you may not be successfully addressing the audience you mean to address.

Questions at issue may be seen as one or another of these six basic kinds:

Questions of fact arise from the reader's need to know "Does this [whatever it is] exist?"

Questions of definition arise from the reader's need to know "What is it?"

Questions of interpretation arise from the reader's need to know "What does it signify?"

Questions of value arise from the reader's need to know "Is it good?"

Questions of consequence arise from the reader's need to know "Will this cause that to happen?"

Questions of policy arise from the reader's need to know "What should be done about it?"

These are sometimes called stasis questions. The **stasis** of any argument is the specific point on which the controversy rests, that point on which one person says "yes" but another says "no" or "I'm not sure." You have often discovered such points when you have listened to someone else's argument and found yourself in agreement with some parts of it but not others. You might have said "Yes, but . . ." and pursued your disagreement in the context of other parts of the argument where you already agreed. The question on which you found yourself doubting was the stasis question, or the **question at issue**.

In any particular argumentative situation, questions of one kind or another will be at issue while others may not be. In a discussion of civil disobedience, for instance, controversy may arise over the meaning of the term itself—or

it may not. A writer may misjudge the issue by choosing a definitional thesis (such as "Civil disobedience applies only to laws that are unjust," or "Any law is unjust that imposes the will of a minority on the actions of another minority") in a situation where a question of consequence is what, in fact, divides the audience. In his essay "Resistance to Civil Government" (found on page 156) Henry David Thoreau wrote:

Unjust laws exist; shall we be content to obey them, or shall we endeavor to amend them, and obey them until we have succeeded, or shall we transgress them at once?

By putting the question in this way, Thoreau assumed that the question of definition (what makes a law unjust?) and the question of value (is an unjust law good?) were not at issue, but that the question of policy (what should we do about unjust laws?) is the one that needed his attention.

More than one kind of question may be at issue, of course, in a particular argumentative situation, and questions of one kind may have to be answered before one can ask questions of another. But the writer who wishes to make a genuine contribution to an inquiry may be aided by thinking about the kind of question that defines the situation. "What is really at issue here? Are we questioning how to *define* a concept or whether an idea (or action) is *good* or whether a certain consequence will *result* or what we *should do* about it?" Trying to place the question in this way is one means by which the writer may meet the audience. Answering the wrong kind of question in any situation will lead to missing the audience—talking at cross-purposes or saying the obvious. You don't want your readers to say, "Sure, but so what?" Ultimately, the question you decide to respond to gives you and your audience a sense of where your essay is headed and what to expect along the way. Once you know what the question is, you'll begin to have a sense of how to remind your audience that you are addressing an idea of importance to them by raising that issue in terms you know they will respond to readily.

Kinds of Inquiry

Different kinds of stasis questions represent different argumentative situations and call for different kinds of inquiry. When **questions of fact** are at issue, it generally means that readers need to be given information or that they require a demonstration that some fact is "in fact" the case. The arguments of science are often of this kind. "At what temperature does water freeze?" is a question of fact, as is "Will this antifreeze work in my car over the winter?" Situations in which questions of fact are at issue are those in which there is an unknown to be discovered.

When was Othello first performed?

Who discovered X rays?

Is it possible to build a bridge here?
What was the final vote on Measure 6?

Such questions have in common the determinacy of their possible answers. In each case, the answer is a matter of verifiable fact. If the answer could not be verified somehow, then the question must remain unanswered. The answers to questions of fact are either correct or incorrect, true or false, yes or no. Such questions will be more or less interesting—either important or trivial—depending on the subject matter.

There is no absolute test of whether a question of fact is worth pursuing for its own sake. In matters of literature, say, or political science, such questions may have less inherent interest than they would in matters of, say, chemistry. I might find an answer to any of these questions and then find myself asking, “So what?” At that point I would have discovered that the question I had been pursuing was only a doorway into a question of larger significance, a question of a different sort.

When **questions of definition** are at issue, it generally means that readers do not accept a particular meaning for a word or concept. Although it might seem as if such questions are easily answered by consulting the dictionary, many questions of definition are not answered so easily if they are actually at issue. Definitions may separate people who know what the dictionary says but who must inquire into shared meanings that no dictionary can contain. For instance, if I do not know what *law* means, I can look it up. But if I ask, “What are the different meanings of *law* in Martin Luther King, Jr.’s letter?” the answer can be discovered only by examining instances of the word in the text itself, which may not define the word for us. Arguments sometimes hinge on definitions that cannot be resolved by verification in the dictionary.

Is Chuck Yeager an astronaut?
Is this film pornographic?
Is abortion murder?

In such cases, the answer lies not only in the meanings of the words but also in the dialectical oppositions the words may imply and on whether certain circumstances match those meanings and oppositions. Such questions may hide deeper issues. Like questions of fact, questions of definition may be ends in themselves or may lead to different kinds of questions.

Questions of definition and questions of interpretation are similar and often overlap. When **questions of interpretation** are at issue, it means that more than the meaning of a word is in doubt but that the significance of something needs explaining. Interpretations may apply to the meaning of many words or the significance of events, actions, structures, or concepts. Interpretations can never be answered by consulting a reference work because they refer to what something means to the interpreter.

Is Othello an Aristotelian tragic hero?
Will this new bridge represent the concern of our community for the environment or will it show others how wasteful we are?
Does the result of this election signify a mandate for all of the candidate’s policies?
Does this film advocate the use of violence as a means of social change?

Questions of interpretation generally are at issue when there is a difference in point of view. Interpretations involve looking at a phenomenon from a particular perspective, or through the lens of a particular dialectical opposition. Hence arguments about interpretation often require that the point of view itself be articulated or defended.

Questions of interpretation arise in most fields, especially when the subject of inquiry is discourse or human action. That Hannah Arendt called evil a “banality” is a fact I can verify by citing her work. What she meant, however, is a question with which historians and social theorists have had to struggle. Anthropologists may seek to interpret a ritual act or a social relationship. Sociologists may seek to interpret data collected in surveys. Questions of interpretation result whenever the significance of a word, an idea, an event, or a fact is not self-evident.

Does the potential uncertainty of questions of interpretation make them less important than questions of fact? We have seen just the opposite. Questions of interpretation often attempt to answer the “So what?” questions that matters of fact can raise. Yet, they seem equivocal because they cannot be answered with the certainty of questions of fact. An idea can often have more significance to our understanding as it becomes less certain. As we attempt to go beyond facts and to establish interpretations, we are dealing with our own relation to the subject matter as much as we are with the raw data. What we learn about when we interpret is twofold: We learn about the subject and we learn about ourselves.

Questions of value are similar to questions of interpretation. When questions of value are at issue, it generally means that people agree on the meaning of something, but differ on whether it is “good” or “bad.” Like interpretation, then, value depends on one’s point of view or the system of values that informs one’s judgment. Some standard of good is used as the measure; thus arguments about questions of value often require one to articulate standards. “Is this essay worth an A?” The answer obviously depends on whose standards of judgment are being used. Yours may differ from your teacher’s and each of you will judge accordingly. Any argument about the issue will have to address both those standards and the features of the essay that they apply to, a question of interpretation. Questions of value nearly always depend on answers to questions of interpretation.

Although some standard of good and bad is at issue in value questions, other words are generally used to communicate a sense of value. **Value terms**

are words that already imply a judgment of good and bad. Thus, the assertion "Huckleberry Finn contains only racist stereotypes," although offered as a neutral interpretation, would generally imply that "racist stereotypes" are not good. The statement "This film is not pornographic, it is erotic"—although seeming to answer a question of interpretation or definition—invokes a dialectical opposition based on value. Questions of definition and interpretation can be questions of value in disguise.

There are those who believe that questions of value depend so much on subjective criteria that they cannot really be argued. Yet all but the most factual kinds of questions are subjective to a degree, and those kinds of questions are the very ones we do not have to argue, because we can demonstrate them. Nearly all real questions at issue require acts of judgment and interpretation, and thus subjectivity alone is not a reason to rule a question out of bounds for inquiry. If we limit argument to questions that are objective, we might find ourselves unable to decide what to do with the information we have gathered, because that decision must result from our own interests, perspectives, and concerns. We must be careful not to associate objectivity dialectically with good argument and subjectivity with bad argument. It is possible to have good or bad arguments of either kind, if that means careful or sloppy, thorough or perfunctory. The idea that objective argument is somehow better may be the result of applying the standards of scientific judgment to all realms of knowledge, but this is risky. There are many kinds of knowledge, some wholly objective, some wholly subjective, and some a mixture of the two.

Questions of consequence are at issue when people find themselves disagreeing or wondering about cause and effect. Answering questions about what causes some occurrence or what result some event will have requires interpretation. "This bridge will help the economy of our city by encouraging more construction of homes across the river." This statement makes two causal interpretations. Causality is subject to varying degrees of certainty. "Will the bridge encourage more home building?" is a question that might not be as difficult to answer, or be as likely to be at issue, as the question "Will more homes across the river help or hurt our city's economy?" Answering either question will require argument about causes and their probabilities.

Do opinion polls discourage people from voting?

What is the effect of too much television on children?

Will tax exemptions on capital gains stimulate investments?

Can the slaughter of elephants be stopped by banning the sale of all ivory?

Speculations, rather than controlled experiments, are necessary to determine reasonable answers to such questions. Yet, like scientific experiments, those speculations must consider which variables make the difference. Thus, most speculations about cause and effect will be conditional: "It depends on . . ." or "Yes, if . . ." Arguments about probable causes generally acknowledge that cer-

tain conditions must prevail and seek to demonstrate that they do. For instance, to argue that the banning of the sale of ivory would end the slaughter of elephants, you would have to show a causal link between the sale of ivory and this slaughter. If ivory comes only from the illegal slaughter of elephants, and if that is the only reason elephants are slaughtered, then banning the sale of ivory might have this effect. In making this case, it would be your responsibility to show that these conditions were the case.

Because most questions of consequence, unless strictly scientific, can be answered only conditionally, it might seem as if they are useless to argue. Think, however, of the vast number of questions of consequence that must be argued if we are to know how to solve important problems in our lives and in society. We seek to solve such problems using the best reasoning we can construct, even if it does not constitute absolute certainty.

When **questions of policy** are at issue, it generally means that readers differ on whether, or how, to take a particular action. Such questions are answered with a recommendation, a prescription, or a preference for some action. Questions of policy thus arise from situations in which alternative actions are possible, and the problem confronting those for whom such questions are at issue is which of the alternatives is best. You can see why such answers also are conditional, because they depend on acknowledging that the action will achieve its end (a question of consequence) and that the end is desirable (a question of value).

Should television networks voluntarily refrain from announcing voting results in the East until the polls close in the West? Should Congress vote to force them to do so?

Should this bridge be built? Should property taxes be used to pay for it?

Should the school board remove Huckleberry Finn from the school library? How should we respond to this action?

How should AIDS prevention information be distributed to children? What form should it take?

Policy questions, like questions of consequence, must be answered conditionally. If the action will bring about a specific result, and if that result is desired, then it follows that the action should take place. But it does not necessarily follow absolutely. Who should perform it? Will negative results accompany the positive one? Are there other, better, ways to achieve the same end? Such considerations always complicate policy issues.

As we have seen, questions of fact, definition, interpretation, value, consequence, and policy are interrelated. No argument is likely to be confined to only one kind of question. Arguing for an answer to one kind of question can imply that other kinds of questions are already answered. In any argumentative situation, some questions will not be at issue while others will define the stasis of the argument. This is why it is helpful to ask what *kind* of question is really at issue.

For instance, if you chose to argue that "The university should send AIDS information to all students," your thesis would answer a question of policy. But it would also presuppose that your audience shared that kind of question with you and that other kinds of questions were not at issue. The discourse community might be divided, not on the policy question, but on a question of consequence, such as "Will this particular piece of information be effective in educating students about AIDS?" You may not be in agreement with your audience on a question of interpretation, such as "Is the university responsible for AIDS education?" or of value, such as "Is AIDS education important enough to justify the expense?" Questions of fact may need to be settled first, such as "Can the university afford this?" or "Do the students already know everything the information provides?" And so forth. Knowing whether a particular kind of question is at issue requires an understanding of what the people in the discourse community are actually saying to each other, what they already agree about, and what they desire to find agreement about. The complex network of issues and stances that characterizes any real controversy is a little easier to understand by thinking about the kind (or kinds) of questions that are actually at issue.

What a Thesis Does

Responding to a significant question at issue confronts a writer with certain responsibilities: to be sure that sufficient reasons exist for believing an idea and to be sure that those reasons are able to be understood by others. These responsibilities are present throughout the writing process. They begin when one thinks about composing a thesis.

A thesis is an idea, stated as an assertion, that represents a reasoned response to a question at issue and that will serve as the central idea of a composition.

After the previous discussions, this definition should come as no surprise. Let's take a closer look at it, to determine what you need to think about when trying to come up with a thesis that will provide the best basis for composing an essay. Each of the terms of this definition has special significance for the process of composing a good argumentative essay.

A thesis is an idea. . . . Some people use the word *idea* to mean something like topic or subject, phrases that indicate an *area* of potential interest, such as "economics" or a "cure for cancer" or "my first encounter with Professor Smith." These phrases might be said to be broad or narrow subjects, but they are not yet ideas because they do not say anything *about* economics or *about* a cancer cure or *about* the first time I met Smith. Perhaps you have had a teacher who was fond of telling you to narrow your subject. Such advice misses the point, unless that teacher also pushed you to come up with an idea by saying something about your subject. The noun *economics* is not an idea. The narrowed (or focused) noun phrase "economic conditions in South Africa in

1875" is still not an idea. "Economics is bull" is an idea—although, of course, not a very good one. The difference between noun phrases that are not ideas and statements that are ideas lies in the verb. Ideas are sentences; they complete a thought by connecting a verb to the noun phrase. Saying something *about* a subject requires making some kind of connection between it and something else. It isn't the size of the noun phrase that matters; it's what you have to say about it—and this will be found in the verb that you connect to it. Any noun phrase, no matter how broad or narrow, might become the basis of many different ideas, even totally contradictory or incompatible ones. "Economics is my best class" is a very different idea from "Economics is bull," and yet both apparently share the same subject.

A thesis is . . . stated as an assertion. Not all ideas are stated with the intention of asserting something to be the case. Even though an idea must be a complete sentence, not all sentences are uttered for the purpose of asserting a proposition. "Go away" is certainly a sentence that communicates, but it does not seem to be proposing anything as true. It expresses a desire but does not put forth a claim. "I guess I'll take a walk." "What a day for baseball!" "Please tell me how to get to the geology building." "Gimme a break!" Sentences, ideas, can perform many other actions besides asserting.

To assert is to claim that some condition is the case. Each of the nonassertions above could be made into assertions by making them into such claims. "A walk would be good for me right now." "Sunny days are best for baseball." "Geology is to the left of Art." Assertions propose ideas to which one might respond, "No, that's not the case," or "Yes, that is the case." As you can see, making assertions implies that one believes in what one has just said. To seem to assert without belief would be a different kind of action: to lie or to joke. Assertions imply a willingness to defend an idea against the possibility that it might not be the case.

A thesis . . . represents a reasoned response to a question at issue. An assertion is worth writing about when not everyone already believes it and when people should care whether to believe it or not. A thesis answers a question, in other words, that people are really asking because they do not already share the answer. As we have seen in the previous section, all assertions answer a stasis question of some kind. Not all assertions answer a question at issue. Consider these assertions and the questions to which they are answers:

It's raining.

Today is election day.

*You should vote "no"
on Measure 6.*

*Measure 6 will violate your
constitutional right to
own a handgun.*

*The Constitution does not make
handgun ownership a right.*

Is it raining?

Is today election day?

*Should I vote "yes" or "no"
on Measure 6?*

*Will Measure 6 violate my
constitutional right to own
a handgun?*

*Does the Constitution make handgun
ownership a right?*

Are the questions to which these assertions respond *at issue*? You're right if you answer "it depends." It depends on who is asking them and why. It depends on the context in which the question is asked. A thesis is a response to a *situation*, which includes a community of people who, for their own reasons, are addressing certain questions. There are situations in which these questions might constitute questions at issue, and there are different situations in which they would not. The difference is whether the answer calls for argumentation. Is there some doubt whether the answer should be believed? If I assert that "It's raining" in a situation where the question is not at issue—where no one cares whether it's raining or not or where everyone is satisfied by my mere assertion—then there is no issue to be argued. If I assert that "Today is election day" in a situation where everyone already knows it, then there is no issue. In this case, however, the question at issue might become "What, then, should we do about it?" and argument might ensue over whether it's worth going out in the rain to vote. Then, again, it might not, if that question is not at issue. If I am talking to some friends who have already decided to vote against Measure 6, then my statement that "You should vote 'no' on Measure 6" would not be at issue, although my statement that "Measure 6 will violate your constitutional right to own a handgun" might be at issue if those friends were divided on *why* Measure 6 should be defeated. If I were addressing an audience of uncommitted voters, my assertion that "Measure 6 will violate your constitutional right to own a handgun" might address a question at issue. But if that audience happened to believe that the Constitution does not provide citizens with such a right, then I would have missed them with my arguments because I chose to address the wrong question. I would have to back up and address the question of whether there is, in fact, such a right. Only by finding the question at issue and arguing for an assertion that answers it do I find my audience.

The judgment of whether you have focused on such a question must be made by thinking about your audience. What do they already believe? What answers do they share with you? On what issue are you divided? To what assertions of yours will they say, "Yes, but . . ."? Such questions help you decide whether to argue this assertion or that one, and the decision can change from situation to situation, from audience to audience.

As a reasoned response to a question at issue, a thesis cannot be taken for granted. It is determined by a process of inquiry into the question. A stance that does not emerge from inquiry is sometimes called a "knee-jerk response" to indicate that it is formed as a reaction without thinking. Keeping a critical reader in mind is one way to be sure that you give a thesis adequate consideration before asserting it unequivocally. And then you may find that a qualified assertion is better than an unqualified one.

A thesis . . . will serve as the central idea of a composition. This final part of the definition points us forward, toward the process of development by which a thesis becomes an essay. The last two parts of the definition, one

pointing backward and one pointing forward, suggest that a thesis has two functions, which stand at the center of your thinking about what you will write. It represents the result of a process of inquiry, and it represents the beginning of a process of putting together sentences and paragraphs to make a whole essay. As a beginning, a thesis provides a basis for any further thinking that you must do to produce a fully developed argument. If a thesis is reasonable in the sense that it emerges from your deliberations about what assertion to argue, it should also be reasonable in the sense of being able to be supported by reasons.

We have already seen how the thesis stands for the whole composition, in a way, and represents its overall intention. This means that the parts of a composition are, in some sense, implicit parts of its thesis. As a complete idea, a thesis will have several parts, and identifying them will become a basis of planning what the essay must say and how it must say it.

For example, suppose I have decided to argue that:

Hydroelectric power provides an acceptable alternative to nuclear energy in supplying present power needs.

Assuming that the assertion satisfies the definition of a thesis in other ways (although it may not), consider how it points forward to an essay. Its parts must become parts of that essay, because that essay would not be complete without satisfying certain demands that the thesis makes. The thesis calls for the essay to describe hydroelectric power and nuclear energy, and also to compare them according to how each satisfies "present power needs," which must also be described. Finally, the essay must make the essential connection that is asserted in its verb phrase: "provides an acceptable alternative to." This will necessarily entail a discussion of *how* hydroelectric power is preferable to nuclear power, probably by showing that it has some benefit that nuclear power lacks or that it avoids some risk that nuclear power creates, or maybe both. There are further parts that this essay might contain, of course, but these constitute the essential elements that an essay written from *this* thesis must contain in order to be complete. (This process is the subject of Chapter 6.)

This example illustrates that any thesis statement creates responsibilities and provides the basis for fulfilling them. You are free to choose your thesis or to change it at any time, but having done so you become responsible for somehow developing the essential parts of your thesis and for *earning* it. There are limitless kinds of possible thesis statements, but all will have essential parts that must be developed and connections that must be made.

Knowing precisely what your thesis is will help you think about what to include and what not to include in your essay. It will help you to distinguish between details that are necessary and those that are superfluous. Of course, no rule will tell you exactly what details are necessary and sufficient to make a complete essay, because every thesis will make its own unique demands. But a precise thesis will make the choices easier to recognize.

The Need for Precision

In the stasis section of this chapter, we saw that different ways of asking a question can lead to different kinds of inquiry. Likewise, the way a thesis is phrased can be very important. Different ways of asserting the same stance can lead to different ways of developing an essay. Hence, you should be ready to ask yourself "Is this precisely the question?" and "Is this precisely what I want to say?" You should be concerned about the precision of your language as you think about questions at issue and thesis statements.

Let's look at a couple of the examples I used to illustrate questions of consequence and see how they might be rephrased more precisely. The question "Do opinion polls discourage people from voting?" seems very general, not because the issue itself is a large one but because the terms are imprecise. Anyone seriously asking such a question would probably intend it to refer to a specific context in which certain kinds of opinion polls occur. But it's hard to tell what is meant when the question remains so vaguely worded. Changing the wording to make it more precise would change the nature of the issue, as in the following possibilities:

- Does the early publishing of exit poll results discourage people from voting?*
- Do people think that opinion polls accurately predict the outcome of elections?*
- Do opinion polls actually change public opinion?*
- Do opinion polls encourage a bandwagon effect that makes it impossible for an underdog to win?*

Other ways of stating the question are possible. Each of them implies a different meaning for the original question. Any of them could have been intended by the original question. So, until a more precise form of the question is found, it isn't clear exactly what the issue is.

Similarly, the question "What is the effect of too much television on children?" is imprecise. Some people would call this a loaded question because the answer is implied: "Too much television" is already a bad thing, and bad effects are what "too much television" must have. But to make a distinction, the issue probably depends instead on saying what the effect of a precise amount of television is. The inquiry might in fact need to address the kind of television and not just its sheer quantity. Also, the issue may need to be defined in terms of some children (i.e., preschoolers) and not others. It all depends on what the members of the discourse community are actually trying to decide. Thus any of these rephrasings, and others, are possible:

- Does lengthy exposure to violent programming cause antisocial behavior in preteens? (What is "lengthy exposure"? What does violent mean? What is "antisocial behavior"? Which "preteens"—in which social conditions? . . .)*

Do cartoons about consumer products confuse children about the difference between advertising and entertainment? (All such cartoons or those of a certain kind? What does confuse mean here? What is "the difference between advertising and entertainment"? . . .)

My further questions about each of these rephrasings indicate that precision is a relative matter. Readers can always ask for clarification. The wording of a question or a thesis statement is precise enough when both you and your reader understand it to mean the same thing. You can't know with certainty, of course, when this will be, so you have to anticipate as many questions as possible and clarify as necessary. When you are part of an argumentative situation that will call for you to write what you think, the effort of drafting and redrafting possible questions at issue and thesis statements for precision will be worth it in helping you think clearly about your argument.

Generating Stasis Questions about Fiction

For this course, you will read mostly nonfiction argumentative essays and develop questions at issue in response to those essays. But how do we understand an author's argument when it is presented through a fictional text? Asking this question assumes that fictional works—short stories, novels, plays, poems, and films—actually do convey arguments. Remember that even though you are writing academic essays to make your arguments, all writing is an act of communication intended to have an effect on an audience. This means that all writing, even fiction, conveys a kind of argument.

The best way to understand the arguments made in fiction is to consider one of the main differences between essays and stories: Whereas a nonfiction essay presents an argument that is given *directly* to the audience, a fictional story presents a plot with characters to whom we respond and through whom a complex argument is made *indirectly*. This indirection makes the arguments presented in fiction harder for us to respond to because we usually can't locate claims or infer a thesis. We respond sympathetically or unsympathetically to characters and their actions rather than to reasons.

This difference between fiction and nonfiction will lead us to different kinds of questions at issue. Because we can't be said to agree or disagree with a plot, because it makes no claim, these questions will be based on what Wayne C. Booth, a rhetorical critic, calls understanding and overstanding. Questions of *understanding* will get us to ask how an author presents his or her arguments through fiction. Such questions are questions of interpretation. There are often disagreements about how to understand a fictional argument. For example, in the course of a story we may begin to care about a character who eventually goes off to fight in a war. One reader might make an assertion about the novelist's

argument: "This author is glorifying war because she gets us to care about a character and, as a result, we respect his decision to go to war." Another reader might object with a more convincing argument, pointing out aspects of the story the other reader has failed to consider: "No, the author doesn't glorify war because the author lets us see that the character is thinking negatively about war at the same time as he goes. In other words, the author is critiquing war because he's showing how strong the pressures are on an individual if they can make someone who is opposed to war decide to fight despite those objections."

These assertions could be developed in an essay with a close look at the elements of the story: How do we know that we are supposed to respect one character and not another? How does the author guide us to have these reactions and feelings? How is the argument complicated when an author leads us to care equally about two characters who disagree in a story? Answering these questions will help guide these two readers in supporting their assertions about the argument conveyed in the novel. The question at issue for these two readers is based on *understanding* because both share a common concern. They both want to answer the question "What argument about war is being made by the author of this novel?" But what if our second reader convinces the first reader that the novel does actually critique the war? If they agree on an understanding of the novel, then they might move to a question at issue based on what Booth calls *overstanding*.

A question at issue that leads to *overstanding* must be based on a shared common ground of understanding: In this case, our readers agree that the author of the novel is critiquing war. At this point, they can move from questions of interpretation to questions of value, consequence, definition, or policy. A possible question at issue in terms of overstanding might be asked in this way: "Is the argument made as convincingly as it could be?" In answering this question, our two readers might again disagree. One might argue that even though the critique is clear, it isn't as convincing as it could be because the character doesn't die in the war. The reader might argue, "If the author wants to critique war, that critique is limited because the main character we care about lives. As a result, we never have to experience the emotions of sorrow and despair that real people experience when they lose someone they care about."

This reader's argument is based on the idea that emotions must be appealed to in a way that corresponds with emotional responses to similar events in the real world. Our second reader might respond in several ways arguing that the novel does effectively critique war. First, he could argue that other characters we do care about in the novel do die and as a result, we experience the necessary emotions of revulsion to war. This argument would be based on the shared assumption that those emotions are necessary for the argument to be effective. The question at issue is whether the novel appeals to those emotions in the reader. However, our second reader might question this concept itself by

agreeing that those emotions are never invoked in the reader while arguing that the author doesn't need to use this emotional appeal to make his argument.

We can consider another type of question that involves overstanding—"Should the author be making this argument?" This question leads us to evaluate a fictional argument even if we agree that the argument is well made. For example, we might agree that a novelist is advocating the use of violence. And we might agree that the argument is conveyed as well as possible. Still, we might want to overstand by pointing out the ethical problems with writing novels that make this kind of argument. On the other hand, we might argue that a novel critiques war but doesn't make that critique as well as it could. Still, we could argue that flawed arguments such as this one are better than convincing arguments that we find ethically wrong.

Stasis questions that come from reading fiction can lead not only to interpretive papers but also to engaging discussion and argumentative essays about issues that are important to our discourse community, a community that includes readers of novels and stories and viewers of fictional works in movies and other forms. These kinds of arguments affect how we respond to ideas as much as direct arguments do, and we can think about them in the same ways.

Revising a Thesis

The process of rethinking and redrafting a thesis is important because it helps you to confront questions in your thinking while changes still can be easily made. It is much easier to rephrase a thesis statement until it works than it is to try to revise a whole essay that has gone off in a confusing direction because it is based on a poor thesis. You cannot predict every feature of an essay in advance, of course, but you can at least have the advantage of thinking through potential directions that an essay might take. Revising a thesis carefully can help you to avoid premature commitments to ideas that may not work out.

You can use these questions as a guide to revising possible thesis statements:

1. Is it an *idea*? Does it state, in a complete sentence, an *assertion*?
2. Does it answer a question that is really *at issue* for the audience? (What *kind* of question is it?)
3. Does the thesis say exactly what I mean? Are the terms I use precise and clear?
4. Has it developed out of a process of reasoning? Have I considered each side of the issue adequately?
5. Can it be developed reasonably?

Having a thesis that satisfies these conditions will help you to see clearly what responsibilities you must meet as you compose an essay in support of it.

Attempting to revise your thesis using these questions will have its payoff in a more coherent, better-argued essay. But it will also prove to be difficult if you feel locked into your ideas and can't change your mind. We feel close to our own ideas, and it's hard to think of them as things to be manipulated and fiddled with, like a clay sculpture. It helps to remember that just because they sound clear and convincing to us, a reader will not necessarily come at them with the same familiarity. So, I recommend going over these questions with a friend in your class, or as part of a workshop in class where others ask these questions about your thesis statement and you ask them about theirs. Get others' points of view. Try out suggestions. Change the wording just to see how it sounds. Let yourself play with the idea in order to get used to feeling less locked into the version of your thinking that emerged on the first attempt.

Nothing can guarantee that you will come up with a good thesis even by working at it. Some people have no trouble coming up with good ideas, whereas others must struggle to find them. (Most of us experience both, at different times.) Having good ideas is simply part of the intuitive mystery of the mind, and no rules can be written to account for it. But trying out a thesis and then thinking about rewriting it—with the five criteria in mind—is one way to keep your thinking alive and focused in a productive direction. It's like giving inspiration a boost.

Questions for Thought, Discussion, and Writing

1. What kind of stasis question is each of the following? How do you know? Under what circumstances might each be at issue? What related kinds of questions might also be at issue in each case?
 - a. Are groups that use dangerous drugs in religious ceremonies exempt from laws against use of those drugs?
 - b. Do college administrations have the right to censor the contents of student newspapers?
 - c. Is marriage outmoded?
 - d. Are scientific experiments that cause pain to animals necessary?
 - e. Do grades inhibit learning?
 - f. Does the widespread practice of repeating "urban legends" indicate that people are willing to believe anything as long as it sounds probable?
 - g. Is mandatory drug testing for athletes wrong?
2. Say whether you think the following statements fit the definition of a thesis. Why or why not? If they could be improved, what would the writer have to think about?
 - a. I want to write my paper about sports and society and how it should be changed.
 - b. Some people just don't know how to take a joke.
 - c. I wish people would stop bugging me about what I'm going to do with my life, so I can find out.

- d. The escalation of defensive weapons into space will make a nuclear war more likely.
 - e. The use of *he* and *man* to refer to both men and women is sexist.
 - f. *The Federalist Papers* should be read by all students before they graduate from high school.
 - g. All teaching will someday be done by computers, leading to a more effective education for all students.
3. What responsibilities does a writer accept in choosing any of these statements as a thesis? What parts would an essay about each of them have to contain to be complete?
 - a. Legalization of marijuana would give young people greater confidence in government.
 - b. Procrastination, more than any other cause, leads good students to perform badly on assignments.
 - c. Belief in a CIA conspiracy to murder President Kennedy has led critics of the Warren Report to misinterpret its findings.
 - d. Overpopulation is a greater threat to world peace than nuclear proliferation.
 - e. Eradicating cigarette smoking by the year 2020 should be a priority of the U.S. government.
 - f. A clear conscience is not necessary for happiness.
 4. Read one of the sections of readings in Part II that includes a work of fiction (e.g., by Barrett or Butler), and consider the ways in which the fictional work addresses issues and constructs arguments. Compare these ways to one of the nonfiction writings. What kinds of questions do these different kinds of writing address? Construct a thesis about the work of fiction that attempts to *understand* that work, and then construct a thesis that represents an attempt to *overstand* it. How would you argue either thesis?
 5. After you have discussed an issue in class, construct a thesis that represents your response to that discussion; that is, something you have to say that addresses some question that was at issue for the class. Considering the five criteria on page 53, revise that thesis until you think it would provide you with a good basis for writing what you have to say in the form of an argumentative essay. Then show that thesis to other members of the class for whom the question was also at issue, and see whether their responses lead you to want to make further revisions.