Writing Effective Thesis Statements & Avoiding Plagiarism

Originally by:
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(with modifications by James A. Smith; esp. regarding plagiarism cases)
Project Tweets

• Due on Friday @11:59pm
• Send it to @BME100Prof
  – Ex: @BME100Prof Martian #healthcare is unsustainable b/c of radiation and distance. #LttlGreen Men R really sick.
• Should read like a Newspaper Headline
• What is important about your project?
• Why is it interesting?
• What are you going to do?
• SMS text conventions OK
Overview

• It is the intention of this presentation to review the **most effective way to write a thesis** statement and the most efficient way to use your thesis statement in your research.

• We will identify what **plagiarism** is, how to avoid it, how to incorporate other people’s ideas, and differentiate between quoting, paraphrasing, and summarizing.
Thesis Statement

• The **thesis statement** refers to the focused part of your paper which outlines the arguments and ideas you will present in your paper.

• When written in advance, a thesis statement can help you structure and outline the rest of your paper.
Thesis Statements

A thesis statement can be thought of as:

• one perspective on a topic
• one mode of interrogating an issue
• one possible answer to a research question
Determine what type of paper you are writing!

- An analytical paper breaks down an issue or an idea into its component parts, evaluates the issue or idea, and presents this breakdown and evaluation to the audience.
  - This is the Literature Survey project
  - Also included in the intro of Hands-on & Position Paper

- An argumentative paper makes a claim about a topic and justifies this claim with specific evidence. The claim could be an opinion, a policy proposal, an evaluation, a cause-and-effect statement, or an interpretation. The goal of the argumentative paper is to convince the audience that the claim is true based on the evidence provided.
  - This is the Position Paper project
Example of an analytical thesis statement

• An analysis of the college admission process reveals one challenge facing counselors: accepting students with high test scores or students with strong extracurricular backgrounds.

• The paper that follows should
  – explain the analysis of the college admission process
  – explain the challenge facing admissions counselors
Example of an argumentative thesis statement

• High school graduates should be required to take a year off to pursue community service projects before entering college in order to increase their maturity and global awareness.

• The paper that follows should
  – present an argument and give evidence to support the claim that students should pursue community projects before entering college
    – All examples courtesy of Perdue On-Line Writing Lab
The Writing Process

Don’t forget: writing involves revision of writing, ideas and argumentation.

As you research, write and edit, your ideas might change and your thesis statement should be updated accordingly.
A Working Thesis Statement

A working thesis or preliminary thesis statement is a rough version of your thesis.

A working thesis:
1. names the topic
2. indicates your position on the topic
A Working Thesis Statement

• This helps to focus your research
• This helps to organize your thoughts about the topic as they develop

Your working thesis statement should change to reflect the content of your paper
Qualities of a Good Thesis

A thesis statement should:

• stimulate thoughtful inquiry
• outline the content of your paper
• articulate the main idea of your paper using precise language
• be one or two sentences in length
  – Short & Sweet!
Qualities of a Poor Thesis

A thesis statement should *not* be:

- open-ended, either thematically or as a question
- so broad that it loses scope
- a contradiction or a rhetorical question
- difficult to locate within the introduction
Generating Thesis Statements

• Start off with the general **topic** you want to write about. Your professor may or may not assign you a topic.

• What is your **position** on the topic?

• Generate a **thesis statement** from that position.
Example 1

**Topic**
- MP3 Players

**Opinion/Position**
- iPods are too expensive.

**Thesis Statement**
- “Today’s MP3 players, such as Apple’s iPods, are priced so high that many middle-class individuals are unable to afford them.”

*How can you improve this thesis statement?*
Example 2

Topic
• Cellular engineering

Opinion/Position
• Stem cell engineering is the most significant area of research in this field.

Thesis Statement
• “Finding new ways to create, preserve and restore organ function through the development of biological substitutes should be the primary focus of biomedical engineers working in the field today.”

How can you improve this thesis statement?
Essay Writing

Essay writing involves creating your own position on a topic using research, literature and theories in order to prove or illustrate your point.
What is Plagiarism?

- Plagiarism occurs when a writer uses someone else’s language, ideas, or other original (not common knowledge) material without acknowledging its source.
  - The Purdue Online Writing Lab (OWL), 2007.

info.library.unsw.edu.au/.../plagiarism.htm
Items to be Cited

Words or ideas, images, diagrams, illustrations, exact wording or phrasing presented in any form of media such as:

- Books, magazines, web pages, TV programs, interviews, conversations, pictures, advertisements, letters, charts or diagrams etc.
Obvious Examples of Plagiarism

- Buying, stealing or borrowing a paper
- Having someone write your paper for you
- Copying sections of text or other information from a source without using quotation marks or proper citation formatting.
Less Obvious Examples

- Using the words of a source too closely when paraphrasing.
- Building on someone else’s ideas without giving them proper credit.
- Using your own previously submitted papers or parts of such papers without checking with your teacher first!
- As a general rule, using more than three words from the original source is considered a quotation.
If an idea is not yours, then it MUST be credited.

Academic writing does not develop in a vacuum. The key is to understand how to negotiate information using a citation style (MLA, APA, Chicago).

"Dear Mr. Trent: Since you only pretended to write this paper, I only pretended to grade it!"
Things That Do Not Require Credit

- Your personal experiences, observations, thoughts or conclusions
- Your own images, artwork, video etc...
- When you are referring to “Common Knowledge”
  - common sense observations
  - myths
  - historical facts/events
Common Knowledge

• Ryerson University is located in Toronto, Ontario.
• Smoking is bad for your health.
• According to Purdue University’s On-line Writing Lab, “you can regard something as common knowledge if you find the same information undocumented in at least five credible sources.” (2007)
• If you are in doubt, however, cite your source. It is always better to be safe than sorry.
Incorporating Information Using Citations

- The citation is only one part of the paragraph.
- Consider whether you need to mention the author’s entire argument or just a portion.
- Given your citation style, are you going to be using parenthetical citations, footnotes or endnotes?
- Consider how this will effect your paragraph.
Citations

• **Summary:** provides an understanding of the core argument of a text in your own words.

• **Paraphrase:** provides an understanding of one aspect of the text in your own words.
  – Used most often.

• **Quotation:** uses the author’s EXACT words to provide one idea.
  – Used to put emphasis on the words of the author or when it is difficult to write the idea equally well in your own words.
Incorporating Citations

• In order to help your paragraph flow, it is a good idea to consider how you can incorporate the source into your summary, paraphrase or quotation.
  
  - Hu et al. [2] argues that...
  - According to Raibert [4],...
  - In their 2005 paper “Robotics in Scansorial Environments”, Autumn et al. [3] suggest...
  - Like Raibert [4], Song and Waldron [1] note:...

REFERENCES

Direct Quotations

• Make sure that any direct quote is between quotation marks or set apart from your own text in a block quote.

• Refer to the style guide that you are required to follow (IEEE, APA, Chicago, etc..) when deciding how to mark your direct quotes. Ask your instructor which style to use.
Direct Quotations

• Use direct quotes sparingly if you cannot capture the author’s sentiment in your own words. Too many quotes disrupt your writing style and in turn disrupt the reader’s attention.

• Resist the urge to simply put all the author’s ideas into quotes. Paraphrasing shows that you understand these ideas and can speak of them yourself.

• Avoid using long quotes. Use ellipses (...) to omit parts or brackets ([ ])) to alter wording.
Avoiding Plagiarism

• Often, plagiarism occurs as a result of bad time management.
• Students writing at the last minute tend to improperly incorporate citations due to tiredness or rushing.
• The pressure of completing a paper on time also encourages some students to purposely plagiarize by including significant portions of the work of others:
  – copying text
  – hiring a writer
  – using a friend’s paper.
Proactive Steps to Avoid Plagiarism

• Speak to your instructor and visit the Writing Centre if you require further instruction or advice regarding the use of quotes or citation.
• When taking notes begin to use your citation formatting.
• When finished writing, revise!
• When in doubt, CITE YOUR SOURCE!
Works Cited

• Special thanks to Purdue University’s On-line Writing Lab (OWL) for their invaluable information.
Real-World (Ryerson) Example

• Plagiarism can happen
  – Between students
  – Between professors

• The following was brought to light in 2011
  – Dr. Fernando is a respected Telecomm. Professor here at Ryerson (upstairs!)
  – His co-authored work was plagiarized by a professor overseas
This article has been removed from the website because it has been found to violate plagiarism rule of our journal.
Retraction Watch

JCO retracts article from major French cancer group over apparent plagiarism
with one comment

The Journal of Clinical Oncology (JCO) has retracted a November 2011 editorial by group of French cancer researchers, including David Khayat, the former head of the country's National Cancer Institute, over what appears to be fairly extensive plagiarism.

Here's the notice for the article, "Lymphocyte Infiltration in Breast Cancer: A Key Prognostic Factor That Should Not Be Ignored." Read the rest of this entry »

PROFESSOR CAUGHT FOR PLAGIARIZING ARTICLES IN NURSING JOURNALS
Posted by Jessica Gopalswaraj on Tue, Oct 18, 2011

Three Wiley-Blackwell nursing journals, The Journal of Child & Adolescent Psychiatric Nursing, the Journal of the American Academy of Nurse Practitioners and Perspectives in Psychiatric Care, recently detected cases of plagiarism in published articles written by Professor Scott J.M. Weber, a now former assistant professor at the University of Pittsburgh School of Nursing. After investigation, Wiley-Blackwell issued a retraction of seven articles after concluding Weber had liberally borrowed previously published research without attribution.

Members of CrossCheck / iThenticate, Wiley enables its journals to check author submissions against the iThenticate database of scholarly content, which includes 30+ million scholarly articles, 70+ million published work from scientific, technical and medical (STM) journals and content from 14+ billion web pages. The retracted nursing articles by Weber had been peer-reviewed, but not screened by iThenticate.
More Real-World Examples

• 2012: Margaret Wente (Globe and Mail)
• 2013: Chris Spence (Director, TDSB)

The Consequence?

• Can come back to haunt you in 15 years!
The Writing Centre

• One-on-one tutorial sessions to help students with writing and referencing at any stage of the process.
  – One 50 minute appointment per week.
  – Book appointments online.
• Daily workshops on a variety of writing-related topics.
• Useful guides and links on the website.

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