

## Some Simple Guidelines for the Preparation of Short Essays

### 1. Thesis statements.

Any short essay will profit from a clear, concise thesis statement in its introductory paragraph. A thesis statement sets out, in one or two sentences, the central claim the essay sets out to prove. It is not a general statement of intent, not an abbreviated outline, not a summary of sources used, and not a restatement of the paper topic. Here are some examples of inconclusive or inappropriate thesis statements:

- a. In this paper I will discuss Anselm's argument for the existence of God.  
After analyzing the principle of sufficient reason, I will compare and contrast Aquinas and Clarke.

Note that there is nothing wrong with these sentences, considered purely as sentences. There might even be a place for them in an opening paragraph. However, neither serves as a claim worthy of defense. That's precisely the kind of statement that's needed to focus a paper right from the outset. The following are somewhat better examples:

- b. Anselm never proves that God, as he conceives Him, is possible.  
Clarke makes the principle of sufficient reason more precise than does Aquinas.

Both of these examples leave room for improvement, but they satisfy the minimal condition for thesis statements: they are claims that are either true or false, and they can be defended and refuted with arguments.

It is often possible to tell when a thesis statement is weak or strong, and to strengthen a weak thesis statement, by subjecting it to the "so what?" test.

**The "So What?" Test.** After you've formulated your provisional thesis statement, imagine someone reading it and asking, "so what?" If an answer comes immediately to mind, chances are your thesis statement is a good one. If you have to work a bit to come up with an answer, then perhaps you could make your thesis statement a little more pointed. Let's subject the second example from 1.b. to the "so what?" test. The imaginary questioner would probably want to know why it matters that Clarke succeeds in making a certain principle more precise than does Aquinas. Reflecting on this concern, we might change the thesis statement as follows:

- c. By making the principle of sufficient reason more precise Clarke saves the cosmological argument from a host of objections to which Aquinas' version was vulnerable.

So, it was possible to save the second example from 1.b., and to improve upon it. When the second example from 1.a. is subjected to the "so what?" test, however, we can't really come up with an answer at all. A belligerent questioner might want to know, "Who cares if you choose to pass the time comparing and contrasting two thinkers. What's the point?" It's a good question, and one your thesis statement should already answer implicitly.

**The Reasonable Disagreement Test.** Another good way to test your thesis statements is by employing the reasonable disagreement test. This test amounts to the question, "could a reasonable person who had read the same things I've read disagree with my thesis statement?" Perhaps surprisingly, the answer ought to be "Yes!" Why is the possibility of reasonable disagreement good? You are wasting your time if you spend an entire essay defending a claim that's obviously true to begin with. Consider the following examples:

- d. Anselm argues that God must exist.  
Anselm was a Martian agent.

The first of these claims is obviously true to anyone who has read Anselm, and so it's certainly not worth arguing. The second claim is obviously false, and thus not worth arguing, either.