

Developing and Revising Thesis Statements

Two tips in one here.

The first will probably be familiar: generating a list of pro and con arguments from readings.

The second involves collecting thesis statements into a Word document and then working as a class to revise them.

The First

For an argumentative essay on capital punishment, students read, annotate and take notes on four essays (one is a long, *CQResearcher* essay – a source from OCC’s databases that I highly recommend). After a day or two of discussion, we take 20-30 minutes at the end of class to develop a list of argumentative points they could use in the essay.

I prompt students to supply the author’s names, and then they draw arguments from the readings. No page numbers are noted in the citations because they were HTML based sources, but students read out the applicable quote from the essay when they suggest the reason (we call this “quote hunting” – I’m a sucker for lame jokes/names).

At the end of this class, we discuss a sample thesis statement and I refer students to a fill in the blank model that they can use or ignore.

Capital punishment should/should not be abolished because of _____, _____, and _____.

They write their thesis using the pro and con list we’ve developed in class (or their own ideas), and email it to me before the next class. Then the [second part](#) of this exercise kicks in.

Jost
Johansen
Freedman
Rimer

Pro (for DP)	Con (against DP)
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Justice/closure (Jost, Rimer)• Problems with legal system<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ Witness tampering/false testimony (need source)• Deterrence (Jost, Johansen)• Could streamline court system (Jost)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Expense (Freedman, Jost)<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ Explanation: cut other safety budgets• Justice/closure (Jost, Rimer)• Possibility of wrongful execution (Jost, Freedman)<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ irreversible• Problems with legal system<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ Witness tampering/false testimony (need source)○ Scares people into false confession• Moral argument/hypocrisy (Jost)

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Deterrence (Jost, Freedman) • Violates the constitution <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Cruel and unusual punishment • Discrimination (Jost, Freedman) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Racial ○ Mental ○ Financial ○ geographic
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The Second

I collect the thesis statements students have sent into a word document (without names) and then project them in class for comment. I review and write out on the board what to look for in a thesis statement to focus our discussion.

1. Main point/position
2. Divisions (what they will use to support their position) – are they distinct and defensible?
3. Sentence clarity (this usually generates the most feedback)

I then go right to the student work, read the first thesis statement, and we work through the three questions. This continues until all statements are commented on. I then email the class all the statements with comments.

What I like about this activity is that it reinforces the idea that they are writing for an audience: they see that everyone needs to understand their thesis – and they see that it's not just the teacher who has suggestions. The students tell me they like seeing the range of ideas and writing styles of their classmates.

If this process seems a bit mechanical, you may appreciate the note I attach to the bottom of my instructions for this essay.

If all this sounds formulaic, it is. You have two choices: ignore the formula and wing it; or work within the formula, yet still use all your skills as a writer to capture the reader's attention and leave a vivid impression of your intellect.

Your call.

Student thesis: before comments

The death penalty is something the United States can function without. With it we kill innocent people, waste valuable resources, and the process is discriminatory and makes it unfair for certain groups of people.

Student thesis: after comments

The death penalty is something the United States can function without. With it we kill innocent people, waste valuable resources, and the process is discriminatory and makes it unfair for certain groups of people<<TIGHTEN WORDING.

Student thesis: before comments

Capital punishment should be terminated because of the closure for the family the expense of it and the discrimination.

Student thesis: after comments

Capital punishment should be terminated because of the LACK OF closure for the family<<CLARIFY, ITS EXPENSE the expense of it and the RAMPANT/UNFAIR/THE CHANCE OF discrimination.

Student thesis: before comments

Since the death penalty process is expensive, time consuming, and discriminatory it should be outlawed.

Student thesis: after comments

Since the death penalty ~~process~~ is expensive, time consuming, and discriminatory,<<< it should be outlawed.

Student thesis: before comments

Capital punishment should be prohibited because of expenses , risk of innocence, and discrimination.

Student thesis: after comments

Capital punishment should be prohibited because of IT IS UNNECESSARILY EXPENSIVE/ITS HIGH COST/RAMPANT expenses , risk/POSSIBILITY of innocence, and ___ discrimination.

Student thesis: before comments

I believe that the death penalty should not be used because it costs lives, can and has executed innocent people, and has yet to be shown as effective in fighting crime.

Student thesis: after comments

~~I believe that~~ the death penalty should not be used because it costs lives<<NOT SURE WHAT YOUR POINT IS, can and has LED TO THE EXECUTION OF executed <<DP ITSELF CANNOT EXECUTE innocent people, and has yet to be shown as effective in fighting crime.

Student thesis: before comments

Capital punishment should not be aloud in America because one can be innocent when accused guilty<<KEEP WORKING ON WORDING, the expense is too high and it can give America a poor reputation<<GOOD IDEA – CONDENSE WORDING

Student thesis: after before comments

Capital punishment should not be aloud in America because one can be innocent when accused guilty<<KEEP WORKING ON WORDING, the expense is too high and it can give America a poor reputation<<GOOD IDEA – CONDENSE WORDING