

Lesson Plan on Testing an Argument

Judy Swan, Assistant Director of Scientific and Technical Writing, Princeton University
Course: Writing seminar on genetics

Lesson objective: (1) To test an argument before committing to it in a draft and (2) to explore the relationship between thesis and argument [again].

Total estimated time: 50-70 minutes

Additional outcomes: Students get a chance to keep talking through their individual topics before the draft is due

Assignment sequence that is underway: Develop an argument about a problem in some current area of gene therapy.

Work completed before class: Students have done general research for their essays and have drafted a preliminary thesis paragraph.

Step 1: Have students read a group of potential theses (drawn from the previous semester's work on the same unit) and rank them by their potential. This involved discussion of the theses themselves and of ideas about thesis in general. (10 min)

Step 2: Group examination of 3 specific theses. The theses varied in the ways you'd expect; most promised too much, and several implied interesting sounding problems for which they offered totally indefensible theses. I asked them to take the statement and work backwards into the introduction and forward into the argument. If this is to be the thesis, what does the introduction need to accomplish? What must be set up to get us to the point of suggesting this argument? What kinds of issues does this thesis raise for development in the essay? Where is this paper going to go? We then considered recasting the thesis to something more workable, looking again at the effects of that change on the introduction and the main arguments. (15 min)

Step 3: Group work on 3 more theses, replicating the large-group work. They were then to rank the theses in terms of 'productivity': Which thesis seems most likely to produce an interesting and coherent argument? For those thesis that were "not yet ready for drafting," they were asked to recast the thesis and problem to find something more successful. (20 min)

Step 4: Check in again to see how each group has ranked the theses. (5 min)

Step 5: Work on your own preliminary thesis. (5-10 min)

Step 6: (If there's time) Share this reworked thesis with one other person and discuss. (5-10 min)

I followed this class with a workshop session of point outlines: Students arrived with 4 copies of the points they planned to make in their essays, and they workshopped them for the session. Several students felt these two assignments essentially gave them ways of testing their arguments

out in detail before they went to draft; they felt the resulting working drafts were more like later drafts, and they could concentrate in revision less on figuring out what they wanted to say and more on figuring out how they could best say it.