

Baruch COLLEGE | WRITING CENTER

DEVELOPING THESIS STATEMENTS WORKSHOP

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LEARNING GOALS

At the close of the workshop, students will be able to:

- Describe the functions of both analytical and call-to-action thesis statements.
- Determine key rhetorical moves of the thesis statement.
- Edit existing thesis statements in order to include causality or complication.
- Draft effective thesis statements.

OVERVIEW

In this workshop, four primary activities take place:

- Students view and read common materials to gain a common background from which to develop theses.
- Students read model thesis statements, in order to distinguish between analytical and call-to-action theses, and to determine key rhetorical moves of a thesis.
- Students edit theses in need of improvement.
- Students draw on model sentence structures to generate their own theses.

LESSON PLAN

Introduction

Begin by asking students what brings them to the workshop: are they working on specific papers? Developing their skills generally? Are there specific issues with thesis development they hope to address?

Frame the workshop's four parts: reading for common background, examining model thesis statements, editing, and developing their own.

Part One: Reading for Common Background

1. **Distribute Handout 1, "On the Rights of Molotov Man."**

- Explain that this material will give context for the example thesis statements to come, as well as provide fodder for students' theses.
- Frame the reading as consisting of images—a photograph and a painting—and excerpts from a conversation between the photographer and the painter.
- Note three key terms used in the reading, and ensure students have working definitions of these:
 - **Molotov cocktails** are improvised weapons consisting of a glass bottle filled with a flammable liquid or gel and a wick. They are designed to be lit and thrown at a target, breaking the bottle and igniting the target. They were first used in the Spanish Civil War of the 1930s.
 - The **Sandinistas** are members of a Nicaraguan leftist/socialist political party known as the FSLN. They overthrew the ruling Somoza dynasty in 1979 and continued to hold power in Nicaragua until 1990.
 - The **Nicaraguan Revolution** was ignited by the Sandinista uprising in 1979. In the violence that followed, Sandinistas ousted a dictatorial dynasty that had been in power since 1936.
- Point students first to the images, and ask them to briefly identify differences: *What's included or left out? What's emphasized in each?*
- Record their observations on one side of the whiteboard.
- When students are grounded in the images, read the transcript excerpts aloud.
- Finally, ask students to summarize the arguments made by Meiselas and Garnett. Add these paraphrases to the observations about the images, thereby **creating a data dump for later use**.

Part Two: Examining Model Thesis Statements

1. **Distribute Handout 2, "Model Thesis Statements."** Read the first two theses aloud, and ask students to identify and discuss the differences between them. Establish these as a call-to-action thesis and an analytical thesis:

- A **call-to-action thesis** makes a recommendation or advocates for a specific course of action, often in response to a controversial social issue or real-life scenario. Call-to-action thesis statements almost always include the words “should,” “must,” “ought” or “recommend.”
 - An **analytical thesis** makes a claim about a subject of analysis: a text, an image, or an argument, for example. It reveals and explains a relationship, cause, effect or reason that might seem hidden, counterintuitive, or in other ways not-obvious to a casual reader.
2. **Categorize and close-read the remaining model theses.** For each statement, ask students both to identify type and to extract key words or syntactical structures to use as models. As they discuss, record their observations on the whiteboard. Encourage them to note, for example, that effective theses:
- **Focus on narrow, clearly defined subjects** (the Pepsi logo, the compensation of active-duty soldiers, Meiselas’s argument about preserving the context of Molotov Man’s struggle)
 - **Use strong, precise verbs** (*should not restrict, uncover, critique, dilute, undermine*)
 - **Assert, foretell and structure an argument** (Acknowledgement of precedent for re-use in this case, followed by assertion of a bigger issue with explanation for why that issue matters)
 - **Provide clear reasons for claims** (incomes of active-duty soldiers and their inability to consent, Meiselas’s incendiary language and her failure to document Arauz’s consent, Meiselas’s threat to sue)
 - **Are not statements of fact, but debatable claims with potential counter-arguments**
 - **Tend to be syntactically complex, or even take two sentences to describe a relationship**
 - **Raise and begin to answer a challenging intellectual question**

Part Three: Editing Thesis Statements

1. **Distribute Handout 3, “Thesis Statements for Improvement.”**
- As a group, read each statement aloud. Ask students, “What needs to change here?”
 - Encourage them to cite the strategies and observations on the board in their discussion. Elicit understanding of:
 - **Thesis 1:** An undebatable statement of fact; requires precise identification of these “different purposes”
 - **Thesis 2:** An unsupportable generalization; requires narrowed focus and attention to potential counter-arguments
 - **Thesis 3:** An absolutism lacking reasons; requires identification of reasons and attention to potential exceptions

Part Four: Drafting Thesis Statements

1. **Distribute Handout 4, “Useful Language for Thesis Statements.”**
- Help students identify the sentence structures that best apply to the assignment they are working on today.

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- Then, ask them to draft thesis statements of their own.
- (If students have no independent thesis to work on, consider pointing them to the questions posed by Joy Garnett at the close of her statement. Briefly discuss whether theses in answer to these inquiries would be analytical or call-to-action, and suggest that students respond to one of the questions directly as they draft.)

2. **Wrap up.** Share and refine student theses.

excerpts from:

**“On the Rights of Molotov Man:
Appropriation and the Art of Context”**

by Joy Garnett and Susan Meiselas
Harper’s Magazine, February 2007, Pages 53-58.

Joy Garnett is a painter and the arts editor of the journal *Cultural Politics*. Susan Meiselas is a photographer best known for her documentation of human-rights issues in Latin America. Both artists live in New York City, and their work has appeared previously in *Harper’s Magazine*. This portfolio is drawn from their conversation at the New York Institute for the Humanities’ ‘Comedies of Fair USe’ symposium, which took place [in 2006] at New York University.

JOY GARNETT:

All of my paintings are based on photographs, and so for this [new] project—which I came to think of as the Riot series—I searched the Web for images of figures in extreme emotional or physical states. [...]

When a gallery in New York City offered to exhibit the Riot paintings in January 2004, the directors and I agreed that the “Molotov” painting was emblematic of the series, and so we chose it for the image on the announcement card.

Partway through the exhibition, I received an email from an acquaintance who had received the card. He said, “That image is from a photograph by Susan Meiselas. Is she aware of your use? And if not, are you going to ask her permission?” He also sent me the link to the website of the Magnum Photo Agency, which represents Susan. The original photograph was different from the fragment I had found. The man with the Molotov cocktail was the central figure of a larger scene, for one thing, and he was also brandishing a rifle. The man, it turned out, was a Nicaraguan rebel. The photograph was from *Nicaragua*, Susan’s celebrated photo essay on the revolution, published by Pantheon in 1981. [...]

... I received a letter sent by a lawyer on Susan’s behalf.... It asked that I give credit to the source in any exhibition of the painting and that I agree to seek written permission from her before I made any further reproductions of the painting. [...]

I wrote a letter to Susan’s lawyer. As requested, I would include a credit line in all current and future displays of the painting itself, as well as on any reproductions, citing Susan’s photograph as its source. But I would not, I said, agree to seek written approval from Susan anytime my painting might be reproduced somewhere.... Susan’s lawyer responded with a much longer letter that cited cases to support Susan’s position and requested a \$2,000 licensing fee for the additional uses. [...]

[In the controversy that followed], several questions came to the fore: Does the author of a documentary photograph—a document whose mission is, in part, to provide the public with a record of events of social and historical value—have the right to control the content of this document for all time? Should artists be allowed to decide who can comment on their work and how? Can copyright law, as it stands, function in any way except as a gag order? These remain open questions for many people. It was a blogger named “nmazca,” however, who posed what has, for me, become the central question in all of the activity surrounding Molotov. Referring to the lone figure of that Sandinista rebel, nmazca asked, “Who owns the rights to this man’s struggle?”

SUSAN MEISELAS:

My own relationship to this picture obviously is very different from Joy's.... I took the picture...in Nicaragua, which had been ruled by the Somoza family since before World War II. The FSLN, popularly known as the Sandinistas, had opposed that regime since the early Sixties. [...]

I made the image in question on July 16, 1979, the eve of the day that [Anastasio] Somoza would flee Nicaragua forever. What is happening is anything but a "riot." In fact, the man is throwing his bomb at a Somoza national guard garrison, one of the last such garrisons remaining in Somoza's hands. It was an important moment in the history of Nicaragua—the Sandinistas would soon take power and hold that power for another decade—and this image ended up representing that moment for a long time to come. I don't think it was published anywhere at that time, and it was only published in my book a year or so later, but in the years since, the image has been subjected to many kinds of reappropriations, most of which, far from condemning, I have welcomed. [...]

... Molotov Man kept appearing and reappearing, used by different players for different purposes. The leaders of Nicaragua's Catholic Church, for instance, noticed that he had been wearing a crucifix, so they reproduced his image on the cover of this magazine in tribute to Gaspar Garda Laviana, a Jesuit priest killed in 1978 while fighting the Somoza regime. [...]

In 1990, I returned to Nicaragua with two filmmakers to document what had happened to the people in my earlier photographs. I learned that "Molotov Man" was Pablo Arauz... [...]

There is no denying in this digital age that images are increasingly dislocated and far more easily decontextualized. Technology allows us to do many things, but that does not mean we must do them. Indeed, it seems to me that if history is working against context, then we must, as artists, work all the harder to reclaim that context. We owe this debt of specificity not just to one another but to our subjects, with whom we have an implicit contract.

I never did sue Joy in the end, nor did I collect any licensing fees. But I still feel strongly, as I watch Pablo Arauz's context being stripped away—as I watch him being converted into the emblem of an abstract riot—that it would be a betrayal of him if I did not at least protest the diminishment of his act of defiance.



Molotov, by Joy Garnett



© Susan Meiselas/Magnum Photos

MODEL THESIS STATEMENTS

1. As the “Molotov” case study demonstrates, copyright law governing fair use should not restrict fine artists from remixing documentary or journalistic images.
2. Perhaps the most powerful element of Meiselas’s photograph is also its most easily overlooked—the Pepsi logo. This red, white and blue symbol of global capitalism subtly uncovers and critiques the relations between wealthy nations and those with less stability.
3. Because American soldiers are most often drawn from the bottom quartile of income earners, and cannot refuse to be photographed in combat, we recommend that they share in any commercial profit from images of them in active duty.
4. Though the precedent for re-use of Molotov Man’s image suggests Garnett’s actions were technically legal, Meiselas identifies the more significant problem with re-use: that it dilutes the cultural value of the original image.
5. Meiselas’s failures to obtain Pablo Arauz’s consent or even learn his name until years later, together with her incendiary language, undermine her ethical authority as an artist.
6. By threatening to sue Garnett, Meiselas reveals that her prime concern was not preserving the context of Molotov Man’s struggle, as she claims, but rather protecting her own economic interests.

THESIS STATEMENTS FOR IMPROVEMENT

1. Both artists used the image of Molotov Man, but for different purposes.
2. Copyright law prevents artists from being creative.
3. Images of war should not be taken out of context.

USEFUL LANGUAGE FOR THESIS STATEMENTS

BASIC SENTENCE STRUCTURES:

Identifying something significant to analyze:

In this play, the character of Joseph symbolizes...
This passage illustrates the importance of...
The author sheds light on the crucial point of...
The text highlights the difference between...
In both [text 1] and [text 2], the authors demonstrate the ways in which...

Affirming what you believe:

From my perspective, the idea that...
I believe that...
In my view, the author...
I strongly agree with the argument that...
I disagree with the notion that...

Challenging an author's argument:

The article fails to address...
The author overlooks...
The argument lacks clear evidence about...
The author's point is questionable in that it...

COMPLEX SENTENCE STRUCTURES:

Linking key background information or evidence to your claim:

Keywords: Based on, As, Through, In + (verb)-ing

Based on the facts concerning the “Molotov” case study, **it is apparent that...**
Based on the analysis of the “Molotov” case study, **I believe that...**
In examining the controversy surrounding artists’ rights, [author’s name] **demonstrates...**
Through the examination of Molotov Man, [author’s name] **identifies...**
In considering the debate over the reproduction of images, copyright law **fails to.../is lacking in that...**
In light of the Molotov Man controversy, **it is useful to reconsider/re-examine...**
As the “Molotov” case study demonstrates, **it is important to...**

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Expressing a less obvious claim by challenging commonly held beliefs:

Keywords: While, Although, Though

While it is true that _____, the more significant problem with X is...

Although it may seem that _____, the more significant issue relates to...

Though X seems to suggest that _____, a crucial part of this debate involves...

While I acknowledge that _____, it is necessary to take into account...

While Garnett makes a strong case for the reproduction of Molotov Man, she **fails to address the deeper problem of**...

Providing reasons for your claim:

Keywords: Due to, Because of

Due to unfair restrictions imposed by copyright law, artists struggle to

Due to the fact that copyright law imposes unfair restrictions, artists struggle to...

Because of X, artists often misrepresent historical events in their images.

Artists often misrepresent historical events in their images **because** they...

Given the fact that American soldiers cannot refuse to be photographed in combat, **we recommend**...

Providing multiple reasons for your claim:

Keywords: Both, Due to, Among the reasons, Not only

Both X and Y are reasons why...

Due to both [reason 1] and [reason 2], I consider...

Among the reasons that call Garnett's actions into question **are** her disregard for the cultural value of the image **and** her statements concerning copyright law.

Not only does [reason 1] contribute to the problem of the reproduction of images, **but so does [reason 2]**.

The emotional appeal of the painting **together with** the omission of any signs of war **convey** a sense of...