

“I will argue that ...”

A Product-based Analysis of Students' Thesis Statements in English Literature Term Papers after a Writing Training in the Discipline

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Kurzfassung

In den anglistischen Literaturwissenschaften steuert die zentrale These die Argumentation wissenschaftlicher Arbeiten, bestimmt deren Relevanz und verankert sie im akademischen Diskurs. Um Studierende bei der Thesenbildung zu unterstützen, etablierte das Schreibzentrum der Justus-Liebig-Universität Gießen 2019 ein Team-Teaching im Institut für Anglistik. Die anschließende Studie untersuchte die zentralen Thesen von Studierenden in den Einleitungen ihrer Hausarbeiten. Die Ergebnisse zeigen, dass Studierende bei der Thesenbildung vor vier Herausforderungen stehen: Komposition/Argumentation, Relevanz, Präsentation und Organisation. Abschließend wird die Bedeutung der Ergebnisse für die Sichtbarmachung disziplinspezifischer Schreibkonventionen in Lehrkontexten thematisiert.

Schlagerworte: Literaturwissenschaften; Argumentieren; Thesenbildung

Abstract

Thesis statements guide the argumentative flow of papers, determine the relevance of arguments, and anchor texts within the academic discourse in English literary studies. To train students in drafting thesis statements, the Writing Center of the Justus-Liebig-University Giessen implemented a team-teaching in 2019 at the English literature department. The subsequently conducted research explored the realization of thesis statements in students' term paper introductions. The results show that students encountered four challenges: composition/argumentation, relevance, presentation, and organization. In conclusion, the results will be discussed regarding their implications for enhancing the visibility of discipline-specific writing conventions in teaching contexts.

Keywords: literary studies; argumentative writing; thesis statements

1 Introduction

Thesis statements are a standard fare in argumentative writing and widely considered key to efficient and coherent argumentation (see Hamlitsch 2015; Hyland 1990; Tankó & Tamási 2008). In Anglophone educational environments, this one- or two-sentence summary of the proposed argument, which appears towards the beginning of texts and is often accompanied by the infamous five-paragraph essay, is widely taught to students in schools and universities across different disciplines and different course types, such as discipline-specific courses, writing skills courses, and L2 language courses. The significance of argumentative writing especially in the humanities can hardly be overestimated as “plausibility, interpretation of evidence, and consistence and credibility of argumentation takes the place that hard facts occupy in the natural sciences” and, therewith, “formats for academic argumentation become utterly important prerequisites for representing the task of academic writing correctly” (Rienecker 2003, p. 96). For disciplines dependent on argumentation for scientific credit, effective argumentative writing is a most essential achievement, which, in turn, partly explains the significance of the thesis statement as the key vehicle of an argumentation in academic texts.

The above is particularly true for those humanities disciplines that rarely work empirically, such as English literary studies (see Fahnestock & Secor 1991). This discipline, nevertheless, poses a special case in at least two respects: 1) Through its research objects and target discourse community, it is to a great extent acculturated to Anglophone academic (writing) traditions even outside Anglophone environments; and 2) it is widely taught as well as studied in English by L2 speakers in non-Anglophone countries. Accordingly, thesis statements haunt academic writing in English literary studies outside English-speaking countries while, at the same time, competing with other culture-specific writing traditions.

While it is often hailed as the key to good argumentative writing, the imperative of the thesis statement as a “one-size-fits-all rhetorical device” (Duxbury 2008, p. 17) has also evoked considerable criticism. First, aspects related to the native language of L2 speakers and a given (academic) culture have been identified as complicating students’ implementation of the “argument up-front” strategy (see Pisanski Peterlin 2008). Second, thesis statement teaching has been accused of creating unoriginality and inhibitions in texts and among writers as a thesis statement curtails argumentation and “controls what you are able to say as well as how you can say it” (Berggren 2008, p. 60). Third, writing research has demonstrated that thesis statements are potentially obsolete in argumentative writing outside of academia, which questions their necessity for coherent argumentation and draws attention to the possible inauthenticity of a convention, that might be “overemphasiz[ed] [...] at expense of the effective conveyance of meaning” (Schneer 2014). In consideration of these drawbacks, it is reasonable to ask whether the composition of thesis statements should even be taught to English literature students in Germany.

The answer I propose is that teaching thesis statement composition to students should not be dismissed as futile. Even thesis statement critics argue that “students should have available to them all the techniques and strategies that professional writers are able to use” (Berggren 2008, p. 61). In Anglophone environments in which thesis statement composition is an educational staple feature this may mean to diverge from a writing convention. For German L2 speakers who study a discipline tied to Anglophone academia and who are often not accustomed to this convention, learning thesis statement composition maybe a way to engage with writing strategies that are new and specific to the discipline or even an academic culture and, therewith, to broaden their repertoire. In the course of the internationalization of academic environments and employment opportunities, this kind of acculturation seems particularly desirable for students.

Possibly precisely because being a significant skill to master and not being consistently used in German academia, thesis statements pose a major challenge to German English literature students and a persistent concern to lecturers. While an amplitude of writing guides and university courses instruct students in composing them, little seems to be known about how these instructions interact with students’ thesis statement composition (see Hamlitsch 2015; Tankó & Tamási 2008). To map some of this uncharted territory, my article briefly relates, first, how the JLU writing center implemented a team-teaching to teach thesis statements; second, how I subsequently analyzed the thesis statements in nineteen term paper introductions and carved out the four main challenges rookie writers encounter when developing thesis statements; third, how the results of my analysis can be used to enhance the visibility of discipline-specific writing conventions.

2 Teaching Students How to Write a Thesis Statement

The Writing Center and two lecturers implemented a team-teaching at the English literature department of the JLU Giessen in the summer term 2019. Two seminars with the same content were held by two lecturers and both student groups received the same writing training carried out by myself. The two-hour introductory seminars, titled “The US-Mexico Border: Politics, Literature, Culture,” took place on a weekly basis. Despite the fact that the seminars were designed as introductory courses for first-year students, the groups were heterogeneous, i. e. they accommodated students from different study programs, different stages, and with different writing experiences.¹ The writing training took place seven times for 30–45 minutes during the regular course hours. It was aimed at training students hands-on in selected aspects of argumentative writing in English literature term papers in interrelation with discipline-

¹ This heterogeneity was due to the fact that students from the faculty can, and often do, choose to take the mandatory introduction courses at a later stage of their studies because of temporal overlaps with other courses or (dis-)interest in the (changing) course topics offered each semester.

specific matters. To receive credit for the course, students had to submit a term paper at the end of the semester.

One of the hourlong writing interventions dealt with the composition of thesis statements. Conjoining the lecturers' requirements with models for teaching thesis statement and research question composition, we developed a low-threshold, in-class exercise that familiarized students hands-on with the basic aspects of thesis statements (based on Hamlitsch 2015; Palmquist & Connor 1994–2020; Purdue University 2015; Rienecker 2003). First, students were familiarized with thesis statements by means of best-practice examples and examples for what thesis statements are not, i. e. statements of intent, of a fact, of a topic or of an observation. Students were also instructed on how to clearly introduce thesis statements with a linguistic signal such as “I will argue/demonstrate/show that” Students were, then, trained in composing their own thesis statements: Based on a free writing, students were instructed to phrase and then answer several “what” and “how” questions in order to focus on a specific literary phenomenon and the way it is represented in a text. Students were further instructed on the necessity of including an answer to the question “why/so what,” i. e. indicating relevance of the investigated phenomenon beyond the specific textual analysis. Some of the students' thesis statements were presented and discussed in class to exemplify common problems. During other writing interventions, the topic was picked up again, for example, where to place thesis statements in term paper introductions.

3 Challenges Concerning Thesis Statements

I conducted a small pilot study, in which I explored the realization of thesis statements in a product-based analysis in nineteen student term paper introductions. The aim of my investigation was to identify some of the key challenges students encounter when composing thesis statements rather than to create a typology. Argumentative typologies in English literary studies as well as thesis statement typologies in L2 writing have been established, and both of these endeavors seem more suitable to investigating texts of more experienced academic writers, who can be sure to compose a successful thesis statement. The typologies focus on what type of argument is put forward by the thesis statements, such as evaluation, or recommendation (see Tankó & Tamási 2008) as well as which type of argument is common in a discipline's discourse community (see Fahnestock & Secor 1991). Accordingly, the typologies are too advanced a) to cover basic compositional aspects and the ensuing problems that are likely to be encountered by less experienced academic writers, or b) to provide insights into the possibly gradual success of inexperienced writers' address of the “what,” “how,” and “why” particles – both of which is important for the learner context of L2 writers in the discipline of English literature. While the existing typologies are valuable for teaching more advanced students to hone their thesis statements, I consider the understanding of key challenges regarding thesis statement composition of rookie writers in the dis-

cipline a first step to support the teaching of thesis statement composition on a more basic level.

My analysis was carried out in three steps: First, I identified the (lack of) thesis statements in the term paper introductions. This turned out to be an unexpected challenge as many students did not use the proposed signal “I will argue that,” or used it inefficiently. In cases in which the thesis statement was not clearly introduced, I followed Agnes Pisanski Peterlin’s approach and conducted a “functional analysis” to identify the “sentence(s) stating the main idea(s), purpose(s), result(s), and/or scope” of the paper (2008, p. 13). In a second step, I evaluated students’ application of the trained criteria by comparing their thesis statements regarding frequency/lack of appearance, linguistic phrasing (“I will argue that”), composition and argumentative efficiency (“what”/“how”/“why”), relevance, and position in the introduction. This allowed me, in a third step, to identify four challenges that rookie writers in English literary studies seem to encounter when composing thesis statements. Those challenges I also compared to insights from the existing research.

The following observations of potential challenges have their limitations. They are neither exhaustive nor unambiguous but serve as a first exploration into the largely uncharted territory of basic thesis statement composition. Most of the term papers I investigated displayed problems in several areas at the same time. The analysis provided below accordingly functions as an illustration of exemplary observations rather than a comprehensive representation of coherent phenomena. Moreover, I examined only term paper introductions and did not take into consideration whether and how the writers realized their proposed argument in the paper. Finally, this study cannot provide insights into the impact of the writing intervention on the students’ performance as neither a control group nor a pre-post comparison could be generated. The value of the study at hand lies solely in being a snapshot of students’ thesis statement composition after a writing training in the discipline.

For a better understanding of unsuccessful thesis statements, I first present a successful one as a model of what a good composition according to the criteria conveyed by the writing training looked like:²

In this paper, I will argue that the portrayal of the situation at the US Mexico Border in the *BILD Zeitung*, a populist German newspaper with a significant range of readers, is characterized by stylistic devices such as dysphemism, hyperbole, or a very pictorial, colloquial style in order to create a particular description of US American politics. This kind of meta-commentary on US politics is used, I argue, to comment on the condition of German immigration policy and has little to do with American border politics. (Student A)

This thesis statement is of a high quality. Most importantly, it addresses all three compositional criteria: The “what”-question is answered by means of the phenomenon observed, i. e. “the portrayal of the situation at the US Mexico Border in the *BILD Zeitung*.” The question “how” the text portrays the phenomenon is answered by “sty-

2 The term paper excerpts provided here are reproduced without changes to the originals, i. e. grammatical and lexical errors appear just as they occurred in the students’ term papers.

listic devices." The "why"-question seems to be addressed a little vaguely at first with the sentence "in order to create a particular description of US American politics," which does not specify the actual particularities. However, the student extends the argument about the relevance by, then, stating that the "meta-commentary on US politics" is actually related to "German immigration policy." Further significance of the argument is also implied by the remark that the investigated newspaper is one with many readers and, therefore, considered to have a wide cultural reach. This thesis statement is not merely an efficient address of the composition criteria but the student's argument about the hidden agenda behind the journalistic coverage is also of considerable complexity and sophistication as the student makes an original proposition about a textual representation the investigation of which is relevant and interesting to the discipline. In addition, the thesis statement shines through the proposed linguistic signal "I will argue that," which facilitates the detection of the paper's main idea in the introduction for the reader, as well as its appropriate positioning in the second paragraph of the term paper introduction.

Only few students provided thesis statement of such an advanced level, though. In the following, I relate the challenges I observed regarding students' composition of thesis statements in their term papers.

3.1 Compositional-Argumentative Challenges

A major challenge that many students appear to encounter is connected to matters that are compositional and argumentative at the same time. On the one hand, the particles "what/how/why" were only partly addressed with a noticeable preference for inefficient address of the "how" and negligence of the "why". On the other hand, inefficient argumentation manifested in "overly general macro-Themes," i. e. topic announcements/statements of intent in lieu of argumentative propositions – a problem already known through prior studies (Miller & Pessoa 2016, p. 8). Interestingly, compositional and argumentative issues frequently appeared in combination and in relation to the absence of "I will argue that" as the following example illustrates:

I am going to compare the different definitions of the American Dream of two families in the book "Tortilla Curtain" which is written by T. C. Boyle in 1995. (Student B)

This statement identifies a "what" – "definitions of the American Dream" in *Tortilla Curtain* – but the "how" raises some problems for the writer. Student B seems to mistake the "how"-question as being related to herself and how *she* is going to negotiate the phenomenon in her paper, her answer, therefore, being 'by means of a comparison.' The "how"-particle, however, asks for how the *text* represents the observed phenomenon. While there is an answer to the "how" innate to the statement, i. e. that the novel provides "*different* definitions of the American Dream," the student misses the chance to turn this notion into a proper argumentative proposition. The statement is also not followed by an address of the "why"-particle; the relevance of the observed phenomenon, though conceivable for literary studies scholars, remains unaddressed by the student's introduction – an occurrence that might be due to a common diffi-

culty of students to answer this question in valid literary terms. The compositional issues might be furthered by the student's avoidance of the proposed phrasing "I will argue that." Instead, she uses the non-argumentative expression "I am going to compare," which can solely function as an introduction to a statement of intent. Although a potential argument is hidden within the statement, it is neither clearly proposed nor truly argumentative in nature.

3.2 Challenges Concerning Relevance

Another challenge for the students seems to be to propose an argumentation relevant to the discipline. Students appeared to struggle with the expectation to write about a literary representation and, therewith, having to turn a real-life interest, with which they might have approached the fictional texts, into the investigation of a literary phenomenon with an ambiguous capacity to fictionally (re-)create – rather than reflect – real-life concerns. While research into literary argumentation identifies the "appearance vs reality topos" as a favorite occupation of literary critics, students may have lacked experience with approaching this difficult, sophisticated argumentation (Fahnestock & Secor 1991, p. 85). Some thesis statements blurred the boundary between fiction and reality, which led to students proposing real-world arguments or trying to prove real-life concerns by means of fictional evidence:

I will argue that every multicultural child has the possibility to build his or her cultural identity for themselves, even though outside influences can make this difficult by trying to prescribe them who and what they are supposed to be. (Student C)

While the student introduces her statement with the appropriate expression, it does not comply with the compositional criteria as neither of the particles is appropriately addressed in literary terms. The absence of a "what"-answer, i. e. a literary phenomenon to be observed, is particularly relevant as it results in an argumentative misconception. It is clear from the student's term paper introduction that she discusses the novel *George Washington Gómez* by Américo Paredes, and based on her thesis statement it can be assumed that she investigates the novel's portrayal of cultural identities of multicultural children – accordingly, a "what" does actually exist in her term paper. Her thesis statement, however, is utterly detached from any argumentation directly related to the novel but rather makes a real-world proposition that is irrelevant to the discipline and cannot be proven by fictional evidence. It is possible to speculate that such a real-life oriented thesis statement may lead to further argumentative troubles as the gap between real-life proposition and literary relevance/evidence would need to be bridged in the paper's main part to compose a coherent argumentation.

3.3 Challenges Concerning Presentation

As the discussion of the examples above indicates, it is not possible to infer from unsuccessful thesis statements that students do not follow a certain argumentative main idea in their paper – an occurrence that is, according to writing research, neither uncommon nor necessarily a hindrance (see Schneer 2014). Further, it could be observed

that some papers which did not provide a thesis statement did propose relevant argumentative observations, simply failing to turn them into an efficiently phrased argumentative proposition:

I have chosen to write about Delaney's development towards a racist person and the way we excuse all that because I realized it on my own that while reading the novel "The Tortilla Curtain" I felt a little bit bad because I could identify myself and sympathise much more with Delaney than with Cándido [...]. At the end, Delaney turned into a racist and I could not identify myself with him anymore and I felt bad about that I did identified myself with him once. But has he been a racist all the time? People sympathise with him through the novel without paying attention that he developed to a racist person long time before. (Student D)

This one-paragraph introduction resembles what has been identified as "one-paragraph macro-Theme," i. e. an inefficient dissemination of the main argument, that is considered an organizational issue (Miller & Pessoa 2016, p. 7). I would like to suggest, in contrast, that this is a matter of efficient presentation in a term paper as the argument provided above does not need to be reorganized into a proper introduction but condensed into an efficient thesis statement. Despite the conversational tone, student D proposes a valid literary argument, observing a phenomenon – the development of *Tortilla Curtain's* protagonist into a racist – and suggesting "how" the novel tricks the reader into sympathizing by inviting identification. While the "why"-question is, again, not answered, its answer stands to reason: the novel holds up a mirror to its readers. Despite an argument emerging in the student's term paper, a more efficient thesis statement composition by means of the particles could have focused the argument on its key aspects and conveyed it more clearly to the reader and, possibly, to the student writer herself.

3.4 Organizational Challenges

Finally, students face organizational challenges when it comes to positioning their thesis statements appropriately in the introductions. Thesis statement frequently appeared as the very first sentence or in the final paragraph, and this insecurity also seemed to lead to a bi- or trifurcation of the arguments even in papers of a higher quality (see Tankó & Tamási 2008):

In an attempt to extract the potential value of both of those stances [i. e. secondary sources], I will demonstrate that instead of creating classical corrido heroes, Américo Paredes' novel George Washington Gómez creates heroes who embody a new kind of heroism, namely everyday-heroes, by showing resilient Mexico-Texan people standing their ground. [...]. This, in turn, enables one to see the Mexico-Texan representation in George Washington Gómez as appreciative of the accomplishments of all individuals involved, no matter how small or impermanent they are. (Student E)

The two sentences provided here are the first and the last sentence of one long paragraph appearing in student E's introduction. While the thesis statement is eloquently phrased and a relevant argument is proposed, a bifurcation of the "why"-answer oc-

curs. On the one hand, student E proposes to “extract the potential value” of two secondary sources, which disagree on the representation of heroism, introduced in the preceding paragraph. On the other hand, student E foreshadows a conclusion in which she will favor one of these interpretations. While the latter proposition only slightly deviates from the first one, it is much clearer and more argumentative in terms of “why” the proposed argument is significant, i. e. because it might cause a change in perspective among readers. The fact that the second statement only appears at the end of the paragraph makes the argument that is provided less efficient. It would have been beneficial if the paragraph had been reorganized to position the concluding statement as following the thesis statement directly.

4 Conclusion

Finely tuned thesis statements were missing in most of the term paper introductions analyzed here. The examples above demonstrate, however, that the absence of efficient thesis statements does not necessarily result in a complete lack of argumentative guiding ideas in the students’ introductions. Relevant arguments emerge from all of the textual examples provided above, which could have been turned into proper thesis statements by means of revising. Moreover, all parties involved in the team-teaching agreed that noticeably more students attempted to produce thesis statements in their introductions. While this impression cannot be validated without a reference group, it might signal that students profit from writing interventions focusing on thesis statements.

Moreover, just because most students did not master thesis statement writing based on the writing intervention, it should not be concluded that they will not master it in the future. Writing experts know that it takes much time and practice for students to implement writing conventions into their texts, and I agree with Pisanski Peterlin that writing is “clearly a teachable skill and increasing the visibility of what is to be learnt must be an indispensable part of this teaching” (Pisanski Peterlin 2008, p. 77). The depicted writing training and the challenges I identified based on the term paper introductions can be used to increase the visibility of writing conventions regarding thesis statements that are to be learnt by English literature students in the discipline inside and outside Anglophone academic environments. This study may, accordingly, serve in several regards as a pedagogical resource for advisors.

The categories of challenges emerging from my analysis and the specific textual examples can be used as a didactic tool in writing trainings in the discipline. They may serve as a basis for one-on-one or collective discussions between students and teachers about what the main aspects concerning composition/argumentation, relevance, presentation, and organization are that students need to watch out for when composing thesis statements, why these aspects are so important in English literary studies, and how these issues could possibly be solved, i. e. how students could revise their thesis statements when they encounter such challenges. Students’ confusion about how to

address the “how” particle efficiently (see compositional-argumentative challenges), for example, can easily be explicitly addressed in a classroom once it is clear that such an issue does occur repeatedly. Issues concerning the relevance of students’ argumentation for the discipline of literary studies could also be openly addressed by means of the thesis statement examples provided above. When students are trained to develop thesis statements in class, the depicted challenges could also serve as blueprints for an analytical peer feedback of other students’ thesis statements or be used by students independently as a set of criteria to compare their own term paper statements to. Moreover, visibility and, therewith, raised awareness among students for the challenges they might encounter when developing thesis statements may make a difference for their development as academic writers in the long run even if it does not necessarily positively impact the final text product right away.

Despite the fact that few of the students in this study produced utterly successful thesis statements, I was quite surprised to encounter so many emerging arguments in their texts that showed much potential to evolve into sophisticated thesis statements with some support by an expert writer as to the “what,” “how,” and “why” or more efficient presentation or organization. The value of my analysis is that the typical challenges I have pointed out make visible the possibly *partial* success of less experienced academic writers in developing an argumentative thesis statement, and, therewith, a) provide teachers with potential points of reference as to what student writers need to work on to improve their thesis statements, and b) show students that learning to write academically is in every regard a process of editing, revising, and developing one’s writing. For both teachers and students, it might be a relief to see that not all thesis statement composition is in vain.

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