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Teaching the thesis statement in UK academic writing classes

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This paper discusses the ways in which the thesis statement, based on experience teaching within the School of Education and English and American Studies at The University of Manchester, differs significantly from what is expected in the USA.

The Thesis Statement as Taught within the USA

- According to Wyrick (2002:33) ‘a good thesis states the writer’s clearly defined opinion on some subject. You must tell your reader what you think. Don’t dodge the issue; present your opinion specifically and precisely’.
- Oshima and Hogue (2006:67) state that a thesis should not be ‘a simple announcement’.
- Wyrick concurs, saying that a thesis should not be ‘merely an announcement of your subject matter or a description of your intentions. State an attitude toward the subject’ (p. 237), further declaring that ‘the single most serious error is the “so-what” thesis’ (p. 229).

While a thesis statement’s purpose may be dependent somewhat on the essay’s mode (to use Wyrick’s term), US students are still instructed to have an opinion within their thesis, regardless of the main rhetorical purpose for their essay:

EXPOSITORY ESSAYS: ‘Here are the facts *as I see them*’ (Wyrick, 2002:189, original emphasis).

NARRATIVE ESSAYS: A narrative essay can be ‘an interesting, persuasive means of informing your readers’ (Wyrick, 2002:339).

DESCRIPTION ESSAYS: ‘A student writes a descriptive essay...to express his view of the real world’ (Smith, 1995:112).

Neman (1995:44) states that ‘the obviously persuasive paper is just a more blatant example of what *all* good expository writing actually is’ (original emphasis); this is the crux of the thesis in the US writing class: to give your opinion on the subject.

Thesis Samples from the Language, Literacy and Communication Programme

Introduction, ‘Introduction to Academic Writing’

This essay will discuss the implications of the product and process schools of writing and having done so decide which is the superior school for developing a student’s writing skills.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it is clearly the process school which is more beneficial to students’ writing development, based on its multi-draft approach and allowing the students to develop at their own pace.

Introduction, ‘Literacy in Society’

In my essay, I will be looking at the literacy events and practices I do in my everyday life and assess whether I believe literacy is actually autonomous or social.

Conclusion

To conclude, through looking at my everyday literacies, I have decided that literacy is more social than autonomous as most people can be literate without being able to read or write.

Introduction, ‘Reading Film: Language and Communication Perspectives’

The thesis of this essay is to discover to what extent elements of the mise en scene reveal the narrative of the film, within a particularly important scene.

Conclusion

...by observing the positive and negative connotations Clark creates on each set through the use of contrast in colour, set design, camera placement and sound between the two sets respectively. The negativity created, through elements of the mise en scene, on Jenny’s set causes the audience to speculate that she will be found to be HIV positive, which is confirmed two scenes later.

Guidance for Students

The information below is taken from the Study Skills website from the Faculty of Humanities (www.humanities.manchester.ac.uk/studyskills/essentials/writing):

An essay needs:

1. An introduction, **telling the reader what the essay is about.**
2. A main body, containing the ‘meat’ of the essay, where you outline your particular point of view, while demonstrating awareness of other perspectives or interpretation.
3. A conclusion, summarising the content of the essay clearly and concisely

The process of writing an essay can be broken down into four phases:

1. Analysis of the question asked.
2. Gathering together the relevant facts, quotations and references which will form the raw material of your argument.
3. Sketching out a plan of the assignment (**which may well include writing out your - provisional - conclusion**).
4. Writing the assignment.

The material is quite broad and vague and Bailey (2006:53) states that an introduction should tell the reader ‘your purpose in writing’ – this perhaps allows for a degree of broadness within the actual thesis statement itself.

The Thesis Statement within Exploratory Research

Introduction, ‘Acquisition of Literacy’

The aim of this piece of work is to compile a case study on a child between the ages of three and eight years old, centring on their use and acquisition of literacy both in the home and at school. This case study will include observations, recordings, comments from the parent and child, examples of the child’s work and also a reflective diary. This information shall be accompanied by a full analysis of the most interesting and relevant discoveries.

Implications for Teaching the Thesis in the USA

Mitchell (2000) states that the argument is not always clear-cut among the disciplines, with Swales’ (1990) analysis of scientific papers revealing that the essays were constructed in four steps: *introduction to field, particular issue being tackled, outcomes, future work*; this has implications for constructing one’s thesis within the hard sciences. This might subsequently suggest that the rather generic approach taken in US writing classes might need to consider the importance of discipline-specific writing.

- Gimenez (2008:152) argues that ‘writing lecturers appear to focus on the basic principles of writing’, such as structuring and referencing, thus ignoring features of writing which are specific to individual disciplines.
- Woodward-Kron (2004:140) offers an implication for this generic approach, stating that it could lead to ‘making connections and generalizations about student writing that may be inaccurate and misleading for specific disciplinary contexts’.
- ‘Student writing in an academic discipline is, if taught at all, taught either in an academic writing unit, which rarely if ever can go beyond the generic, or within a disciplinary department, where there is rarely the appropriate expertise in academic writing’ (Elton, 2008:1)

Conclusion

Further studies are of course needed to determine if indeed the suggested approach to thesis writing in the UK is generally representative of the UK as a whole or not, and if so, what might the reasons be for the differences between the two countries’ approach? On the other hand, US composition classes might need to reconsider the ‘one size fits all’ approach taken to thesis statements and in doing so, create a writing class in which the students, who might represent as many as a dozen majors, become more aware of discipline-specific writing conventions.

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