

Developing a Thesis Statement as an Enthymeme

What is an Enthymeme?

A thesis statement is arguably the most important part of any academic essay because it sets many actions in motion for your essay. Strong thesis statements do four important things:

1. Provide the central claim your essay will explore
2. Demonstrate a relationship between ideas
3. Grab the reader's attention and situate his or her thinking
4. Guide your own thinking

These are a lot of tasks to assign to a single statement in your essay, and therefore developing a strong thesis statement can be the most challenging task of writing an essay. Consequently, composing a strong thesis statement should involve a lengthy thought process precisely because it communicates a thought process to your reader. But how do you go about actually *thinking* to create a thesis statement, and then how do you translate that thinking into writing?

A tool of ancient rhetoric, dating back to Aristotle, can help us here. It is called the *enthymeme*, and it is useful for composing a reasoned thesis statement because it requires you not only to make a claim, but also to think about the support you will use to make that claim and the underlying logic connecting the claim with the support, which you assume your reader will understand. There are three parts of an enthymeme:

1. Central claim
2. Evidence (also called by some instructors the support or reason)
3. The underlying, unstated assumption that provides the logic by which the support proves the claim (also called by some instructors the warrant or grounds)

The first two parts should be clearly stated in your thesis statement, typically linked with the word *because*, which is a strong word for demonstrating the supporting relationship between claim and evidence. While the underlying assumption may go unsaid in your thesis statement, it is important to understand this portion of the enthymeme because it will not only help you determine if your thesis statement makes logical sense, but also help you to determine if your essay's claim is based on a premise that might not resonate with your audience. Moreover, this underlying assumption, along with the evidence, will be what the body of your essay explores further to support your central claim and create content for the essay.

Therefore, working out a thesis statement in the form of an enthymeme can help you ensure that your thesis statement accomplishes the four things listed above that strong thesis statements do.

An Enthymeme in Action

Below is an excerpt from an essay about crimes committed in massively multiplayer online games, the whole of which you may find in your textbook, *The Norton Field Guide* (727-729):

RuneScape, the game [the] Dutch minor was playing, is a bit different from both *EVE*, whose point is to engage in Bernie Madoff-esque shenanigans, and the more well-known

World of Warcraft. *WoW* has a very strict policy against scamming, thievery, and even harsh language; violators can be banned, and victims' lost goods are refunded. The developers of *RuneScape*, however, didn't explicitly state that the thief couldn't do what he did, nor did they refund the victim his item. So here, we have a real-world court attempting to punish someone for behavior permitted within the realm. The real and virtual laws conflict, and it seems unfair to penalize the teenager for this. Reportedly, the player also beat up his victim, for which he should, of course, be punished. But attempting to bring real-world law into virtual realms—and putting monetary value on time spent immersed in a virtual world—seems dangerous.

-from "Should Gamers Be Prosecuted for Virtual Stealing?" by Alex Weiss

Through careful reading of Weiss's writing, we can see the three distinct parts of an enthymeme emerging in his argumentation:

- It is dangerous to use real-world laws to prosecute crimes in the virtual-world. (Central claim)
- The real-world and virtual-world laws conflict. (Evidence)
- It is unfair to penalize someone when laws conflict. (Underlying, unstated assumption connecting the reason to the claim, which readers must accept as plausibly true)

An enthymematic thesis statement for Weiss's article might read,

- It is dangerous to use real-world laws to prosecute crimes in the virtual-world because laws in the real-world and laws in the virtual-world conflict with each other.

If this were an essay you were writing, taking the time to construct this enthymematic thesis statement provides many ideas and points of support that can be organized into an outline, which can be the basis for a thorough essay supporting this central claim. Body paragraphs, then, might further explain each of those sub-parts: the central claim, the contradictions, and the explanation of why it is unfair to penalize someone on the basis of contradictory laws. For example:

1. Introduction
 - a. Anecdote to introduce topic and specific question
 - b. Thesis statement: It is dangerous to use real-world laws to prosecute crimes in the virtual-world because laws in the real-world and the virtual-world conflict with each other.
2. Body Paragraph I (support for the reason in the enthymeme): Rules about stealing differ
 - a. Specific example: Some games encourage stealing
 - b. Explanation of example as support
3. Body Paragraph II (support for the reason in the enthymeme, continued): Rules about fraud differ
 - a. Specific example: Some games encourage the creation of fictitious avatars
 - b. Explanation of example as support

4. Body Paragraph III (support for the underlying, unstated assumption in the enthymeme):
Conflicting laws are a bad basis for punishment because the conflicts reflect differing values
 - a. Specific examples: Online communities allow fluid identities—they are almost expected—whereas the criminal justice system depends upon firm identification
 - b. Explanation of example as support
5. Body Paragraph IV: Defeating possible counter arguments
 - a. Specific example: Just because a behavior is virtual does not mean it does not have real-world consequences, for example, cyber bullying
 - b. Refutation of the argument: not all behaviors that may be regulated count as cyberbullying
6. Conclusion
 - a. Reminder of central claim

Out of a single statement that provided a central claim, demonstrated a relationship between ideas, and demonstrated some contemplation of what the audience must assume for the argument to make logical sense, the framework for an entire essay draft emerged as well.

Enthymemes Help You Connect to Your Audience by Flushing out Poor Assumptions

The most underappreciated thing that writing thesis statements as enthymemes can help the beginning college writer to do is to figure out whether an argument begins from a underlying assumption or premise that readers may find offensive or unsavory, which would cause the writer to lose the readers' attention and trust. This assessment of the underlying assumption or premise is accomplished by thinking carefully about what your reader must assume in order for your argument to make sense. In the above example from Weiss, the underlying assumption not only provided the logical connection between the claim and reason but also was a premise that most reasonable readers can accept without qualms: contradictory laws are not a fair basis for punishment.

A historical example of using the enthymeme to tease out poor assumptions is Abraham Lincoln's critique of the infamous Dred Scott Decision, which was the United States' Supreme Court's decision in 1857 that barred persons of African descent from holding citizenship. In his own writings, Lincoln discovered the central claim, the evidence, and the underlying assumption of the Dred Scott decision:

- Nothing in the Constitution or laws of any State can destroy the right of property in a slave. (Central claim)
- Nothing in the Constitution or laws of any State can destroy a right distinctly and expressly affirmed in the Constitution of the United States. (Evidence)
- The right of property in a slave is distinctly and expressly affirmed in the Constitution of the United States. (Underlying, unstated assumption)

By breaking the argument in the decision into its enthymemic parts, Lincoln reveals not a problem with the logic of the argument, but a problem with an underling premise, or unstated assumption, that reveals what he argues is a flawed understanding of the Constitution; the assumption behind the argument is unsavory to both abolitionists and twenty-first-century Americans. As Lincoln writes:

There is a fault in it as I think, but the fault is not in the reasoning; but the falsehood in fact is a fault of the premises. I believe that the right of property in a slave is NOT distinctly and expressly affirmed in the Constitution...I believe that the Supreme Court...may search in vain for the place in the Constitution where the right of property in a slave is distinctly and expressly affirmed. I say therefore that I think one of the premises is not true in fact.”

-from *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, ed. Basler

In other words, the Court’s argument in the Dred Scott decision only makes logical sense if you are willing to accept the assumption or premise that the Constitution guarantees a right to hold slaves, which by the 1850s was a premise a growing number of Americans, including Lincoln, were rejecting.

To provide an example based in a more contemporary issue, consider this sample enthymematic thesis statement:

- Women should not serve in combat units in the United States Marine Corps because men are more capable of performing combat duties.

In this example, here are the three parts of the enthymeme:

- Women should not serve in combat units in the United State Marine Corps (Central claim)
- Men are more physically capable of performing combat duties (Evidence)
- Women are not capable of performing combat duties (Underlying, unstated assumption)

While the construction of this thesis statement is logically valid, the underlying assumption is a premise that many of today’s readers will outright reject as unsound and discriminatory against women. Such a weak underlying assumption can seriously weaken your entire essay.