Ascent Classical Academy
of Douglas County

INTRODUCTION

What Is the Senior Thesis, and Why Should I Undertake It?

The idea of writing a thesis may be new to you, but it's actually a very old practice. A thesis is an argument, and in this case, it is an argument that is researched, written, and defended. Students in graduate school typically write a thesis, hence the term "master's thesis"; for PhD students, the extra-long research project is specifically called a "dissertation." These graduate students compose and then publicly defend their theses before experts. And this process—research, write, and defend—has been revived as something of a rite of passage for seniors at a growing number of high schools today.

For high school seniors who complete the thesis, it functions as a capstone project, meaning that it is a crowning achievement in their academic journey, and specifically in their study of rhetoric. In it, they bring all that they've learned—reading, writing, arguing—to bear on one issue, an issue about which they care deeply. They learn the background of the topic, they analyze other people's arguments, and they synthesize their findings and discoveries, putting it all together to form a true, good, and beautiful whole.

Think of the senior thesis as a kind of artist's masterpiece; historically, a "masterpiece" was that first original creation that marked an artist's move from "student" to "master," qualifying him for membership in a professional guild. Just so, the senior thesis is an academic "masterpiece," a sign that the student has earned the right to move from the desk at the back of the room to the speaker's stand at the front.[1]

This workbook will take you through the process of writing—and then delivering—a thesis yourself. Use it as an all-in-one resource: journal / scratch pad / research notebook / rough-draft-to-final-copy writing guide. Yes, you could write a thesis without this workbook, but using it as a catch-all organizer and handy guide is like having a good map on a wilderness adventure in Yosemite National Park: You may escape alive without it, but the fact that it's in your pocket will make the journey much easier.

[1] Nota Bene (Note Well): The senior thesis is akin, in many respects, to the undergraduate or master's thesis, or even to the doctoral dissertation. A helpful difference between theses and dissertations that high school students will want to keep in mind is the following: Whereas the thesis calls its writer to synthesize a body of knowledge and defend a claim about a given subject, the dissertation requires that its writer make an original contribution to that body of knowledge. Senior theses, therefore, should strive more for synthesis than originality.

PAPER, PRESENTATION, OR BOTH?

If you are only delivering a speech, then this book is for you. You will work through the text from start to finish, all the while composing in the less formal tone of a spoken address. (Remember to start by reading the "Levels of Style" section in chapter 16, which discusses the more conversational tone of a speech.)

If you are only writing a thesis paper, then this book is also for you. Continue along, chapter by chapter, though you will be able to skip the final chapters—chapters 16–21—which concern memorizing and delivering the speech.

If you are both writing a paper and delivering a speech, this book is for you, too. You have a double duty; after all, delivering the speech is not a matter of merely standing up and reading the formal paper. Instead, you should end up with two very different versions of the same material: a formal written version and an informal spoken one.

There are several ways of going about the double duty of writing a paper and delivering a speech—for example, the speech first and then the paper, or both simultaneously—but the recommended way is this: Write the academic paper first, and then spend a couple of weeks recasting it as a verbal address. (This recasting is taught in chapter 16, "Turn It into a Speech," just before chapters on memory and delivery.) This workbook will walk you through the process, step by step.

Let us begin, then, where one always ought to begin: with a good idea.

CANON ONE

INVENTION

DISCOVERING GOOD IDEAS

Writing a thesis—even writing a solid paragraph—can be a daunting task. Where does one begin? How does that blank sheet of paper turn into a piece of well-written, well-researched prose, which then moves the hearts of an audience? The ancients had an answer for how to tackle the enterprise: step by step. These steps of the writing process are called the five canons of rhetoric—invention, organization, style, memory, and delivery.

First is **invention**, the discovery of arguments. The invention stage is the most important of the five canons because it concerns the content, which is the heart of the message. **Organization** follows; arranging the content to its most powerful effect takes care, even wisdom. Then is attention to **style**, or expression. After all, how the thought is conveyed in words can enhance or detract from the message. **Memory** is next; one commits to mind the arguments and their order. The final step is **delivery**, the presentation of the message complete with gestures and facial expressions and all that factors into presenting it well.

Of course, these canons are not always neat and tidy steps. In actuality, a rhetor (one who practices rhetoric, either in speech or in writing) shuffles among them, tweaking style, discovering new arguments, and rearranging old arguments along the way. Nevertheless, thinking of the writing process in this order helps us to approach with a little less trepidation the seemingly mysterious process of going from a blank sheet of paper to a polished presentation.

The process starts with ideas. Good ideas aren't a dime a dozen, and they don't grow on trees. Good ideas must be discovered. Classical rhetors called this process of discovery "invention," from the Latin *invenire*, meaning "to find, discover, or devise." Once you happen upon a good idea, however, your work still isn't finished; the good idea must be formed and developed into something more. It needs to be teased out and connected to other ideas, eventually becoming a solid argument. Hence, the student who is "inventing" is striving to determine *what*: "What will be included in the thesis? What is my basic claim? What evidence supports it? What must be said? What ought to be left out? What counterarguments need to be addressed?" The answers to these *what* questions will make up the thesis's content.

Invention is thus the first and most important of the five canons of rhetoric. These first few chapters lead you through the process of discovering and developing the content of your thesis.

CHAPTER 1

FIND YOUR TOPIC

Because writing a senior thesis is a long process, choosing a topic shouldn't be a hasty affair. You might think that choosing an "easy" topic that would be simple to write about is the smarter choice, but "easy" doesn't always turn out to be so easy. Easy can get boring—boring for both readers and writers. And boring theses end up falling flat. So you'll want to find a topic you care about, one that you're passionate about, one that's thorny, deserving of your time and attention. Many students have remarked that the thing that pushed them through writer's block in the end was the personal passion that they had for the topic. During this process, it is you who are going to learn more than anyone else—more than your thesis director and more than every member of your audience. So the question is, what do you want to learn about? What do you want to spend the next few months exploring in depth?

Think of it this way: If you had to go on an eight-week trip with another person, would you choose someone who never makes waves but whom you don't particularly care for, or would you choose someone you love hanging out with, even if you end up squabbling some of the time? While the former may initially seem like the safe choice, the latter will likely ensure that the trip is a memorable one you enjoy. The same can be said of your thesis: Go for interesting, thought-provoking, even puzzling. Such a topic can withstand your questions and surprise you with its revelations.

The first step is narrowing in on a topic. A **topic** is simply a general area of interest; a topic is a subject or theme, like "family mealtime" or "suffering." A topic is not yet an **issue.** Issues are discovered when you happen upon a point of controversy over which reasonable people can take opposite sides, such as "whether family mealtime is important" or "whether suffering is meaningless." Hold off on the issue, and start by identifying a broad topic of interest. In fact, you can begin by getting to know yourself better. What makes you tick? Consider the following questions.

QUESTIONS FOR PERSONAL REFLECTION

1. What do you think about or do when you have free time?
2. What do you love? List ten things.
3. When you walk into a bookstore, which section do you go to?
4. What is your favorite type of movie/book? (Science fiction, drama, romance, thriller, offbeat comedy, history, biography, documentary, etc.)
5. If you asked your parents what your strengths are, what would they say?
6. Weaknesses?
7. If you asked your closest friends what your strengths are, what would they say?
8. Weaknesses?
9. What has been your favorite subject of study in school? Why?
10. What do you worry about?
11. What are your hobbies?
12. What do you wish your hobbies were?
13. What book have you read recently that you'd like to know more about?
14. You are different from everyone else, even your closest friends. In what one way would you say you stand out?
15. What do you think are the vital elements of eudaimonia, the good life?
16. What are you fascinated by?
17. What "drives" you?
18. What social problem in the world troubles you most?

19. What are you incredibly good at? What are your gifts?

20. When was the last time you went above and beyond what was required? What did you do, and why did you work so hard?

21. When was the last time you were in a state of "flow" or "in the zone" and totally lost track of time? What were you doing? (Do not include texting, watching TV, etc.)

22. Think back to the last time you engaged in a topic of conversation with others for more than an hour. What were you talking about?

23. What is something about your childhood that has shaped who you are today?

24. What is something without which you wouldn't be you?

25. What do you do to unwind? (Again, television and social media don't count.)

26. How do you help others?

27. What is something you dislike about your community?

28. How would you change the world?

29. Whom do you admire the most? Why?

30. When you watched the news last, what upset you the most?

31. What views do you have that almost no one in your class (or family) shares?

Reflect on your answers, and jot in the margins any topic ideas that come to mind. Spend some time considering just what makes you *you*.

CHAPTER 3

FIND YOUR ISSUE

Now that you have decided on your topic, it is time to brainstorm issues. Again, a topic is a general category of interest, and the issue introduces the rub: What is an important and specific controversy regarding the general topic? For example, *adoption* is a topic; *whether people should consider domestic adoption before international adoption* is an issue. *Nuclear energy* is a topic; *whether nuclear energy should replace fossil fuels* is an issue. Before you definitively decide upon your issue, it is important to identify what kinds of issues you are considering.

FACT, OPINION, AND WISDOM

There are statements of fact, and these statements are true or false. Likewise, facts either exist or they do not. Any "issue" concerning a fact is really a matter of the most basic form of understanding. For example, it is a fact that two plus two makes four. You either understand it or you don't; understanding that fact may be a result of someone explaining it well, but it is not a result of persuasive argumentation. Moreover, facts are generally settled affairs, meaning they can be passed down from generation to generation, and their truth can be verified again and again. We don't usually argue about facts.[1] Instead, we consult experts, or those who know.

There are also opinions. Yes, there are better and worse opinions, but most people think of opinions as self-reports, or statements of subjective belief. And many would argue that all people have a "right" to their opinion. "Who's to say?" is often what is meant when people speak of personal opinion. (Think of one's preference in foods: "I love Indian food!" "What? I can't stand that spicy stuff.") Thus, attempts at persuasion concerning opinions—opinions that have been formed by a unique blend of cultural and personal factors—can often feel out of place.

[1] Be careful here! Not all "facts" are actual facts. Often, debaters will invoke a "fact" that has not yet been established; that is, its existence is still contested and in doubt. Additionally, whenever people say, "It's a fact!" in an attempt to shut down their opponents, be leery of this trump card. While there may be an established fact in such cases, the implications of that particular fact are often not self-evident or immediately known.

Let's list some questions of fact:

- *Are brain injuries increasing among NFL players?*
- *Do students who study Latin get higher scores on the verbal section of the SAT than those who don't?*
- *What is the percentage of successful technology leaders who studied the liberal arts in college?*
- *Does video game violence contribute to aggressive behavior problems?*
- *Who was Cicero?*
- *Is the temperature of the planet rising?*

Now for some questions of opinion:

- *What is the best team sport?*
- *Who is the most important American author?*
- *Is midnight blue more beautiful than pale yellow?*
- *Is Mrs. Smith friendly?*
- *Is keeping a journal the best way to understand yourself?*
- *Who is the most talented American singer in history?*

Generally speaking, facts need only to be established as evident; they are backed by evidence. Another way of saying this is that facts are objective; they exist or do not exist independent of one's beliefs about them. Opinions, on the other hand, are expressions of beliefs. They are not objective but rather *subjective*, dependent upon the person expressing the statement. They may be judgments *about* facts, but those judgments themselves have no bearing on the facts; moreover, those judgments can change over time.

But then there are the "wisdom questions." In a sense, the wisdom questions seem to have a foot in both camps. Or perhaps it's more accurate to think of these questions as unwilling to have a foot in either camp, for their answers are found neither in the all-or-nothing, objective realm of facts, nor in the arbitrary, willy-nilly realm of opinion. In other words, whereas a question of fact can often be answered with a *yes* or *no*, the answers to wisdom questions aren't black and white. Instead, they usually are *better* or *worse*, *wiser* or *more foolish*. Strange as it is to say, these questions are about the most important things to us as human beings, and yet we rarely have settled agreement on them.

Take a look at the following wisdom questions:

- *What makes us human?*
- *What is our purpose?*
- *What is the meaning of life?*
- *Is it ethical to clone humans?*
- *Do aesthetics matter in a place of worship?*
- *Should sports be a central part of education?*
- *Should the U.S. change its immigration policy?*
- *Should families limit their size, or are large families a good thing?*
- *What role should the government take in mediating marriages?*
- *Should euthanasia be legal?*
- *Is family mealtime a necessary component within the life of a healthy family?*
- *What responsibility do humans have as stewards of the environment?*
- *Should humans embrace the limitations and responsibilities of hard work, or should technology be used to automate all jobs?*

Notice again how questions of wisdom are different. In some ways, they do seem to be like questions of fact because they are trying to move toward a claim about the world, a claim that we can deem to be truthful and that we can find evidence for. But they also seem to be like opinion questions in that there are a variety of positions people can take regarding them, and they are more difficult to "prove" than statements of fact; the evidence that leads to an answer is of a different kind. These debates remain unsettled, with intelligent people falling on both sides of the issue. And they require sensitive deliberation as we weigh and consider the potential answers.

These, the wisdom questions, are the ones you should be considering for your thesis—they concern the application of sound judgment in our everyday lives.

WHAT A SENIOR THESIS IS NOT

1. A book report
2. A summary of other people's arguments
3. A one-sided polemic
4. A list of facts
5. A personal reflection

WHAT A SENIOR THESIS SHOULD BE

An *argument* that is . . .

. . . interesting, even controversial.
. . . fair-minded to both sides.
. . . clear and organized.
. . . based on evidence, not mere opinion.
. . . compelling, calling the audience to action.