1 Formulating a Topic

Think of your essay as answering a single question which can be stated in a single sentence. Think of the substance of your essay as given a single answer which can be summarised in two or three short sentences.

> TEXT. What is the central question in Caroline's essay? What is her central answer? Where does she state them/does she state them clearly?
>
> SELF-DIAGNOSIS. What is the central question of your essay? Formulate in a single sentence. (If you know it: what is the central answer you'll give? Can you formulate it in two or three sentences?)

As per the writing guide, there are four ideal conditions for a good thesis question/answer:

1. The question is sufficiently *narrow*.
2. The question is *interesting*.
3. The answer is *focussed*.
4. The answer is *somewhat original*.

Don't obsess too much about these features now. As you start writing, your thesis will naturally become better in each of these dimensions. Some advice:

- Avoid deciding big questions (e.g., is liberal feminism the best form of feminism?). Instead, focus on smaller aspects of the big questions (e.g., does liberal feminism get the question of pornography right?).
- Think of your thesis as taking a small step towards a big aim. There are the big questions of philosophy and politics, and you are considering how the play out in a specific area.
- Avoid arguing for something which everyone/most people agree with ("populism is a problem for democracy"). Roughly, an interesting question is "open": reasonable, educated people will come down on different sides.
- With respect to focus, ask yourself: does every bit of my argument relate to the overall claim I wish to defend.
- A thesis being "original" does not require that it defends a *unique* view. The view can have been defended before, even with similar arguments. What matters is that at each step, the ideas in the thesis are yours.
- Also: each particular element of your thesis might not be a particularly new thought. But that does not mean that the *combination* and *arrangement* of these elements isn't original.

> TEXT. How does Caroline's thesis fare in each of these respects? What steps does she take to make sure she does well in ensuring narrowness, interest, focus, and originality? Where in the text does she signal each of these?
>
> SELF-DIAGNOSIS. In which respects do you think (at the moment) that your thesis needs improvement? What steps could you take to do better? But also: to what degree do you need to worry about these features now?

2 Interdisciplinarity

You're writing an *interdisciplinary* thesis. Roughly, this means that there needs to be *some* philosophical/normative argument in your thesis, and *some* applied/empirical/legal argument. The degree to which your thesis contains each of these is up to you: your thesis could be 70% philosophy and 30% policy, or the other way around.

Your central claim should be a normative claim. It should be a claim about what *should* be the case.

The normative and empirical/legal parts of your thesis also need to be *integrated* in your thesis in some way. There are two directions to consider here:

- The empirical/legal/applied must be relevant to the philosophical/abstract/theoretical.
- The philosophical/abstract/theoretical must be relevant to the empirical/legal/applied.

But don't think the connection has to be too tight; it will not always be possible to integrate everything.

TEXT. What is Caroline's central normative claim? How does she integrate normative and empirical argument? How is this integration reflected in the structure of the text?

SELF-DIAGNOSIS. Is my central question normative? If not, how could I make it normative? How do my normative and my empirical argument "speak to each other"?

3 Structuring a Thesis

There are many ways how you can structure a thesis. There's no one-size-fits-all. Instead, think about what functions your essay has to do. Then think about how you can best order these functions within your essay.

The following are *not* in the order in which they must appear in your essay, and your essay will not have all of these elements:

- *Make the reader interested*. Show that there is some interesting applied, moral, legal or philosophical problem, and how it has some real-world relevance.
- *Sketch background*. If necessary, show how the essay question connects to a wider debate or historical/philosophical/legal/social issue.
- *Limit the scope of the topic*. Say what the essay will not be concerned with, or say what it takes for granted.
- *State clearly what the central problem or dilemma is*. Sometimes it will be obvious what the problem is, sometimes showing what the problem is will require significant work first.
- *Define key terms and make important distinctions*. You don't have to define everything; but with particularly vague and central concepts, you will probably want to do so.
- *Outline relevant empirical evidence*. This can take a wide variety of forms: providing a case study, assembling results or theories from social science, discussing legal precedent, outline historical/social background, etc.
- *Textual exegesis/legal interpretation*. Sometimes, you need to develop the strongest form of a claim first. If you're dealing with a primary author or a difficult legal context, you will also want to spend some time interpreting and analysing it.
- *Describe/apply/analyse/argue for philosophical theory*. Even if you take a specific philosophical approach for granted, you need to describe it carefully.
- *Develop policy proposal or solution*. Describe the content of your solution, and why/how it would solve the sketched problem. Discuss alternatives, if necessary.
- *Raise and rebut alternatives/objections*. Consider strong objections to claims you have made, and rebut them, or discuss why you haven't chosen some alternative. If necessary, concede some points to your critics, but show how this is no big issue.
- *Sketch wider relevance/implications.* Given the position you have taken, what might follow for connected debates? What wider implications might the position have?
- *Other…*

TEXT. In which part of her thesis does Caroline tackle which of these functions? Is the order in which she goes through them useful? Could it be improved?

SELF-DIAGNOSIS. Which functions can I foresee that my thesis needs to fulfil (abstractly and concretely)? What could a useful order be in which I tackle them?

4 Argument Sketch

Your argument sketch should consist of a *numbered* set of points which gives your reader an *analytic* overview of your thesis argument. It's analytic in that it doesn't try to spell out everything in detail. It focusses on the big lines of argument.

Try to make each point its own logical unit. Separate out claims which, while related, are different.

You can have "subpoints" under a given point, which you can also number if you like.

Each point should consist of a few simple, declarative sentences. Try to force yourself to write simply.

The main claim you wish to defend should be the very first.

Give each of your points a brief title to make it clear what the function of the point is (for some suggestions, see under "Structure").

Make it totally clear to your reader how the different points hang together.

Note whatever supporting evidence you have for a point (e.g., literature, legal cases, empirical research) in brackets at the end of the point.

If you are not yet sure whether you want to defend a particular claim, you can add "tentative" or "possible" to a point. If you think there are several ways you could go, just say so ("Point 5: Alternative 1 … Point 6: Alternative 2 …").

BUT: Don't get obsessed with making the structure too neat. If your argument does not (yet) fit this structure, feel free to break it as necessary.

EXAMPLE

1. Main Claim. There should be no difference in the legal treatment of mere pornography and art with pornographic content.

2. Relevance of Claim 1. Currently, law in both the UK and the US makes exceptions to bans on pornography if artistic value can be shown, contradicting claim 1. (Here I will add supporting evidence for the relevant legal rules.)

3. Narrowing Claim 1. To make the topic more accessible, I will only focus on the issue of pornographic magazines versus pornographic novels.

4. Definitions for Claim 3. By pornography, I understand "sexually explicit writing and pictures designed entirely and plausibly to induce sexual excitement in the reader or observer" (Feinberg).
By pornographic novel I mean a serious work of high culture which has some pornographic content.

5. Overall Argument. If we can justify different legal treatment, then (5.1) there must be some feature F that pornographic magazines have, and (5.2) pornographic features do not have feature F, and (5.3) F is strong enough to justify making a legal difference. I argue that there is no such feature F.

6. Version 1 of Claim 5. (6.1) Pornographic magazines are not speech, (6.2) Pornographic novels are speech, (6.3) there is a relevant difference between speech and non-speech. (Argument found in Finnis)

7. Counterargument to Claim 6 (tentative). Claim (6.1) is wrong. Pornographic magazines are speech, because they do convey cognitive messages (even if that is not their primary purpose). Empirical example: some pornography conveys the message that women are inferior to men.

8. Version 2 of Claim 5. (8.1) Pornographic magazines do not serve important human interests, (8.2) Pornographic novels serve important human interests, …

etc. etc. etc.