

The Distinction between Thesis, Argument, and Argumentation

Contributed by Ronald Barnett

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It is of the utmost importance to be clear about the essentials of, and the relationships between, thesis, argument, and argumentation. My *thesis* is the core message at the heart of a text on which I am working. Ideally, that message should be sharp and definite, no matter how intricate the text and no matter whether the text is a 500-word article for a local magazine or an 80,000-word book. I can state the thesis of each of my books in a single sentence, and that it is the kind of sharpness that I look for in an abstract. It is an answer to the question: what is this text going to tell me?

My *argument* is the set of steps that I take to build up and to substantiate the thesis. In the introduction to some of my books, I have laid out the argument in a list of a number—perhaps twelve or fifteen—of propositions that form, as it were, the skeleton of the book. There may be some kind of relationship among the individual chapters—perhaps a proposition forms the thesis of a particular chapter—but the point is that those propositions form the substance of the argument of the text as a whole. Seeing that set of propositions, the reader can immediately see the voyage that the book is taking and the sights that will be encountered on the way.

Argumentation is the way in which the argument is taken forward. It is of the essence that the text—whether it is empirical, theoretical, conceptual, policy-oriented, deriving from archival documents, or whatever it may be—moves carefully forward step by step. Often, whether as reviewer, editor, or supervisor, I have observed two adjacent sentences in which the first sentence is perfectly fine and the second sentence is also perfectly fine, but the connection between them

eludes me. Sometimes, the writer will say in response that the connection is perfectly clear! It is obvious to the writer because they are filling in the gaps in their mind's eye and cannot easily see how it might appear to a reader. Therefore, argumentation has to be built up, painstakingly and step by step. It is like putting in the bricks on a building: one cannot put in any row of bricks unless all the underlying rows of bricks have already been put in place and they have sufficient mortar. And—like a bricklayer—from time to time, one has to step aside to view it from different angles to ensure oneself that all the bricks are present, in the right order and the right place, and that they all bind together tightly such that the building is unlikely to fall down. That is argumentation.

So thesis, argument, and argumentation: the argumentation builds the argument that buttresses the thesis. These are three of the essential elements of clear and stylish writing.