

Isn't It Ironic: Learning to Create Nuanced Arguments and Thesis Statements

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Introduction

Previously, we discussed how to generate a strong, in-depth thesis statement by incorporating a claim, reason, and a "so what?". Today, we are going to continue to practice that important skill and learn how to create a more nuanced thesis statement using irony. But irony is useless without a purpose—you must consider what you are trying to accomplish by using irony. What *argument* are you making? With or without irony, you will need a clear argument (presented as a thesis statement) to make an effective claim. First, let's review how to build a strong thesis without irony.

Objectives & Materials

After the lesson, students will be able to

- generate a clear, convincing thesis with a claim, a reason, and a "so what?"
- apply those thesis-building skills to ironic claims.
- identify and interpret irony in the arguments of others.
- use irony to strengthen their arguments.
- have a more nuanced sense of the various ways to structure an argument.

Materials:

- Jonathan Swift's "A Modest Proposal" "Modest Proposals: Isn't It Ironic?" activity handout
- whiteboard and markers
- paper and writing implements

Steps/Procedure

Step 1: Thesis Statement Review

- Write "claim," "reason," and "so what?" on the board.
- Ask for a volunteer to make a basic claim and write it on the board.
- Ask for another student to add a reason to that claim and write it on the board.
- Ask a third volunteer to write a "so what?" on the board to create a complete thesis.

Step 2: Definition of Irony

Irony, in its most simple form, is saying the opposite of what you mean to prove a point. Sarcasm is what we call verbal irony. There are other levels of irony: dramatic irony (*Romeo and Juliet*, for instance) and cosmic irony (for an uplifting example, consider the idea that the toil of our life is meaningless because the solar system will collapse in 5 billion years).

Step 3: Irony in "A Modest Proposal": Individual Hands-on Activity

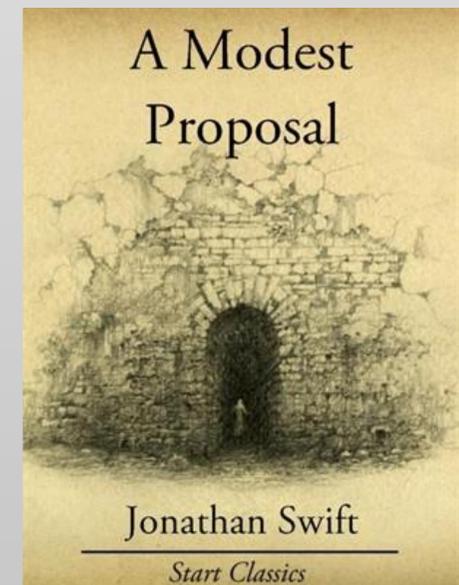
- Step 3a: Jonathan Swift and Irony
- Step 3b: Individual Activity: Dueling Thesis Statements
 - Give students three minutes to write a "straight" thesis for "A Modest Proposal" that incorporates a claim, reason, and "so what?"
 - Have a few students share their theses with the class.
 - Discuss how we know he doesn't literally mean his audience should dine on children; ask students for examples from the text.

Step 4: Group Activity

Distribute the "Modest Proposals: Isn't It Ironic?" worksheet and instruct students to break up into groups of three. In this exercise, you will use irony to turn three of the following "modest proposals" into nuanced thesis statements. Be sure to add a reason and a "so what?" to each claim to create a strong thesis.

Analysis

A strength of this lesson is that even while incorporating irony, it emphasizes the thesis-building skills that will continue to be valuable throughout the course of the semester and in every paper the student must write for other classes. Also, because Swift's essay is so over-the-top, the students enjoy it and find it entertaining, which opens them up to more learning. The group activity always gets a lot of laughs, and its amusing nature again allows students to learn without feeling oppressed. I have taught this lesson twice to great success. A weakness of this lesson is that some freshmen are not quite able to wrap their minds fully around the idea of irony yet. However, I always notice stronger thesis statements in my students' papers after I teach this lesson.



Examples from "Modest Proposals: Isn't It Ironic?" worksheet

Instructions: With a partner or in a group of three, use irony to turn three of the following "modest proposals" into nuanced thesis statements. Be sure to add a reason and a "so what?" to each claim to create a strong thesis.

1. Kittens should be allowed to join the police force to prevent crime.
2. The law should require that people dance, not walk, from point to point.
3. The word "the" should be banned from all television shows.
4. Jury duty should be compulsory for three-year-olds.
5. Wikipedia should give diplomas to its most faithful readers.
6. Hyperactive children should be exiled to hot air balloons until adulthood.

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