

Stasis Theory

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Overview of Stasis Theory

Yet another way of categorizing arguments is to consider their status or stasis—that is, the kinds of issues they address. This categorization system is called stasis theory. In ancient Greek and Roman civilizations, rhetoricians defined a series of questions by which to examine legal cases. The questions would be posed in sequence, because each depended on the question(s) preceding it. Together, the questions helped determine the point of contention in an argument, the place where disputants could focus their energy, and hence what kind of an argument to make. A modern version of those questions might look like the following:

1. Did something happen?
2. What is its nature?
3. What is its quality?
4. What actions should be taken?

Here's how these questions might be used to explore a "crime."

Did Something Happen?

Yes. A young man kissed a young woman against her will. The act was witnessed by a teacher and friends and acquaintances of both parties. The facts suggest clearly that something happened. If you were going to write an argument about this event, this first stasis question proves not very helpful, since there's no debate about whether the act occurred. If the event were debatable, however, you could develop an argument of fact.

What Is Its Nature?

The act might be construed as "sexual harassment," defined as the imposition of unwanted or unsolicited sexual attention or activity on a person. The young man kissed the young woman on the lips. Kissing people who aren't relatives on the lips is generally considered a sexual activity. The young woman did not want to be kissed and complained to her teacher. The young man's act meets the definition of "sexual harassment." Careful analysis of this stasis question could lead to an argument of definition.

What Is Its Quality?

Both the young man and young woman involved in the action are six years old. They were playing in a schoolyard. The boy didn't realize that kissing girls against their will was a violation of school policy; school sexual harassment policies had not in the past been enforced against first-graders. Most people don't regard six-year-olds as sexually culpable. Moreover, the girl wants to play with the boy again and apparently doesn't resent his action. Were you to decide on this focus, you would be developing an argument of evaluation.

What Actions Should Be Taken?

The case has raised a ruckus among parents, the general public, and some feminists and antifeminists. The consensus seems to be that the school overreacted in seeking to brand the boy a sexual harasser. Yet it is important that the issue of sexual harassment not be dismissed as trivial. Consequently, the boy should be warned not to kiss girls against their will. The teachers should be warned not to make federal cases out of schoolyard spats. And with this stasis question as your focus, you would be developing a proposal argument. As you can see, each of the stasis questions explores different aspects of a problem and uses different evidence or techniques to reach conclusions. You can use stasis theory to help you explore the aspects of any topic you are considering. In addition, studying the results of your exploration of the stasis questions can help you determine the major point you want to make and thus identify the type of argument that will be most effective.

Stasis Questions at Work

Suppose you have an opportunity to speak at a student conference on the issue of global warming, which has been a particularly hot topic on your campus. The Campus Young Republicans are sponsoring the conference, but they have made a point of inviting students with varying perspectives to speak. You are concerned about global warming and are tentatively in favor of making changes to industrial pollution standards aimed at reducing global warming trends. You decide that you'd like to learn a lot more by investigating the issue more fully and preparing to speak on it. You use the stasis questions to get started.

Did something happen?

Does global warming exist? The Bush administration, on the one hand, is skeptical, so much so that the President refused to sign an international agreement aimed at reducing global warming. Environmentalists, on the other hand, argue that the phenomenon does exist, that it has reached very serious proportions, and that it must be addressed as soon as possible. In coming to your own conclusion about global warming, you will weigh the factual evidence very carefully, making sure that you can support your answers to the question "Does it exist?" and that you can point out problems associated with counterarguments.

What is its nature?

Looking for definitions of global warming also reveals great disagreement. The Bush administration defines the phenomenon as naturally occurring, while environmentalists base their definition on industry-related causes. Thus you begin to consider competing definitions very carefully: How do the definitions they choose to use foster the goals of each group? Who gets to say what definition is acceptable? What is at stake for industry in promoting its definition of global warming? What is at stake for environmentalists in putting forth their definition? Exploring this stasis question will help you understand how the context of an argument shapes the claims that the argument makes.

What is its quality?

This question will lead you to examine claims that global warming is-or is not-harming our environment. Again, you quickly find that these charges are hotly contested. The pro-industry stance of the Bush administration shapes its analysis, leading to a dismissal of claims that the phenomenon is causing great environmental harm. Exploring these arguments will allow you to ask who or what entities are providing evidence in support of their claim and who stands to gain in this analysis. Turning to the environmentalist arguments, you ask the same questions: Where does evidence for the dangers of global warming come from? Who stands to gain if the dangers are accepted as real and present, and who stands to lose if they are not?

What actions should be taken?

In this case as well, you find wide disagreement. If global warming is a naturally occurring phenomenon, then it is at least arguable that nothing needs to be done, that the problem will correct itself in time. Or perhaps those in the administration who have made these arguments will decide to recommend a new study of global warming in an effort to prove once and for all that their understanding of global warming and its effects is the correct one. If, on the other hand, global warming is a clear and present threat to the quality of the atmosphere, as the environmentalists argue, then they are bound to recommend implementing appropriate and effective responses to such danger (although not everyone agrees on precisely what such responses should be). You quickly discover that the goals and definitions being used directly shape the actions that each side recommends. As you investigate the proposals being made and the reasons that underlie them, you come closer and closer to developing your own argument.

Using the stasis questions as a way to get into the topic of global warming adds up to a crash course on the subject. As you sort through the claims and counterclaims associated with each of the questions, you move toward identifying your own stance on global warming—and toward the claim you want to make about it for the student conference. You come to the conclusion that global warming does exist and that it does present a serious danger. Yet given the audience for the conference, you know that you still have quite a bit of work to do. Since many will not agree with your conclusion, you begin to gather the most fair and evenhanded research available to make your case, and you begin working to establish your own credibility and to consider how best you can present your case to your specific audience.