Stasis Theory: How Can It Help Generate Ideas?

Student writers often struggle with the transition from a broad subject to a narrowed writing topic. Stasis categories help writers get from general topics to focused research questions by asking a series of open questions. Stasis questions show that there can be many angles to any given argument beyond the “pro” vs. “anti,” so stasis theory can help student writers to generate more nuanced argumentative positions. Thus, stasis questions are especially useful for students writing argumentative analysis and persuasive essays.

**What Are Stases?**

Stasis (plural “stases”) comes to us from the Greek “standing” or “stoppage.” It’s the sticking point at which we realize where and why two or more points of view have come to disagree. Stasis asks not just *what* we are disagreeing about but what *kind* of disagreement it is. Stasis questions work as tools to analyze arguments and to produce arguments. For example, researchers can ask what kinds of arguments are being made at the expense of competing arguments, and writers can envision what they might argue about a topic and what arguments they plan to address. Let’s look at five questions that sit at the root of many forms of argument:

* **EXISTENCE / FACT:** These are often questions related to science and history, and disagreements at this level of stasis concern the basic facts of a case. Is the topic a real thing that exists or has happened? Are Bigfoot and Nessie real or imagined? Is the Earth’s climate warming? It’s hard to adjudicate disagreement when parties cannot accept the same set of essential facts.
* **DEFINITION / TYPE:** These are questions about labels and categories, and are more prevalent in public disputes than we often think. Should Pluto be classified as a planet? Should vehicular homicide by an intoxicated person be considered murder? Are militants in various parts of the world soldiers, freedom fighters, or terrorists? Do we call those who flee to the United States “refugees,” “undocumented persons,” or “illegal immigrants”? Are almond and soy milk “milk”? Is cheerleading a sport? As you can see, how we decide to label something often affects how we value it, our next point of stasis.
* **VALUE / QUALITY:** Value questions are often moral topics. Is something good or bad or right or wrong? How should we evaluate actions like smoking? Is marijuana good, bad, mixed, or indifferent? Should we hate or pity criminals? Is all killing wrong? Should we feel sorrow or joy at the deaths of enemy soldiers?  What is the value of nonhuman life?
* **CAUSE / MOTIVATION:** These questions manifest in public controversies as vocabularies of praise and blame. Who or what is causing an issue or problem? Was it intentional or accidental? Where is it coming from? What could prevent it or promote it? Whose economic policies can be blamed for recessions? Is crime caused by poverty, bad parenting, or violent media images? Are terrorists motivated by religion, politics, or economics?
* **POLICY / ACTION:** Assuming that we have adequately agreed to accept the same relevant facts, to use the same labels, to evaluate a situation according to a shared criteria, and to assign particular causes, there remains the critical work of deciding how to resolve a situation. These policy and actions questions are, unsurprisingly, contentious. Should we build prisons or alleviate poverty in response to street crime? Should we ensure food security through monocropping and pesticides or through diversified organic farming? Should we enact laws to combat climate change or assume that technological innovation will solve the problem? Should war or diplomacy resolve disputes between states?

**As an Analytical Tool:** Stasis questions help you examine opinion pieces by determining what kind/s of argument/s they make by using the five categories listed above. This framework helps develop argument analysis by grouping similar claims into paragraphs and sections. In other words, noticing what claims a given author makes about fact, definition, value, causation, and solution allows writers to make detailed distinctions when writing textual analysis.

**As a Research Tool:** Stasis questions allow you to group sources that you have discovered through databases such as Academic Search Complete into smaller groupings by identifying which sources argue about stases of fact, definition, value, cause, and policy.

**As a Documentation Tool:** Using stasis categories to write annotations for your sources allows writers to build annotated bibliographies through resources such as [NoodleTools](https://legacy.lib.utexas.edu/noodlebib) and to be reminded of what kinds of claims sources make long after initially reading them.

**As a Composing Tool:** Stasis categories offer tools for brainstorming, freewriting, and revising compositions. Stasis allows students approaching any complex problem to break the problem down into sessions of writing about relevant facts, definitions, values, causes, and solutions. Shorter essays can focus on one of these stases while longer ones can feature several of them as individual sections.

**As a Peer Reviewing Tool:** Writers can use stasis categories to offer feedback to classmates and other writers who may be unaware of the kinds of claims they are including in their own argumentative essays.

**As a Writing Center Tool:** Using this stasis handout can make your session with a UWC consultant more productive by allowing you to discuss your analytical, informational, and argumentative claims in terms of facts, definitions, values, causes and solutions.