

## INVENTION—GENERATING IDEAS WITH STASIS THEORY

One way to invent something to say is to think about the kinds of questions people might ask about a subject. Just as classical rhetorical theory offers a system for the process of writing, it also offers a system for inventing or analyzing what's at issue in any debate. This system is called **stasis theory**. Stasis theory can help you come up with ways to argue and it can help you understand the ways others are arguing. The term *stasis* comes from a Greek term that means "a stand," as in "taking a stand." For the Greeks, who literally pictured their arguments, the arguer envisioned where "to stand" in a particular debate. The best translation here might be "issue," as in understanding what is "at issue" in a controversy. That's a phrase you might hear in a news report covering a topic; the reporter, having introduced the topic and offered some information, might begin to delineate "what's at issue" in the topic by saying what various participants or factions in the debate think and what kinds of questions come up in the matter. When you are thinking about a topic for a composition, it can be useful to imagine yourself as a reporter looking at some problem and beginning to think about what's at issue, where the controversies are, where you may take a stand.

Stasis theory presents us with categories or questions to pose in understanding a debate or understanding where there is debate or disagreement in an issue. There are many theories about how many categories of the stases there are; some theorists use slightly different categories than the ones we have included here. In general, the stases and the questions they pose are these:

Stasis	Questions
<b>Conjecture</b> (or fact/definition, or essence/existence)	Did it happen? Does it exist? What is it? How is it defined?
<b>Cause/Effect</b>	How did it get this way? What caused this to happen? What are/will be the effects of this?
<b>Value</b>	Is it a good or bad thing? Is it right or wrong, honorable or dishonorable? Is it better or worse, more or less desirable than any alternatives? Should it be sought out or avoided?
<b>Action</b>	What should we do about this? What actions are possible? What proposals shall we make about it?
<b>Jurisdiction</b>	Who should handle this matter? Who has the right to decide this matter?

## RHETORICAL ANALYSIS AND STASIS THEORY— DETERMINING WHAT'S AT ISSUE IN A TEXT

You already know something about **stasis theory**, about the categories of questions for thinking about what is at issue in a topic. When you do rhetorical analysis, particularly of a persuasive text, it's important to know what arguments are being made, and one way to recognize the arguments is to think of what kinds of issues are being discussed.

Determining “what’s at issue” in a debate is crucial to understanding the topic, proceeding with research, and finding a solution. But arguers rarely stop to identify the kind of issue they are debating. Imagine two educators disagreeing over whether a national school exit test should come at the end of the eighth or twelfth grades. They will probably not stop to tell their audience, “The issue we are debating here concerns what course of action to take.” Yet the reader analyzing their arguments needs to have a general system for describing what kind of issue is being addressed.

The first four stases are “hierarchical”, meaning they build on each other and there must be agreement in an earlier stasis before there can be agreement in a later one. So, for example, before two historians can agree about the **causes** of terrorism, they must agree not only that terrorism exists (a matter of **conjecture**) but also on how to **define** it. Similarly, before two policy analysts can agree on a proposal of how to deal with terrorism, they must agree that it exists (**fact**), on how exactly it should be **defined**, on what **causes** and **effects** it has, and on its **value**. Then they can debate a plan of **action**. The stasis of **jurisdiction** stands outside this hierarchy but it can relate to any of the other questions. Thus before the policy that the analysts working for the executive branch agree upon can be implemented, it must be agreed that it is the executive branch that has a right to make such decisions.

### FIRST STASIS: CONJECTURE (OR FACT AND DEFINITION)

The questions in this stasis concern the existence, nature, and attributes of subjects. Arguments about whether something existed or exists, happened or is happening belong in this stasis. Some disagreements concern how or whether a potential “fact” can be verified, and some disagreements go deeper and question whether the status of “fact” is even possible in some cases.

Identifying facts can depend on prior definitions. We saw this with the recent recategorization of Pluto. Because there was disagreement on what constituted a planet, there was disagreement about which bodies in space should be categorized as planets. Once the definition was changed, the categorization was changed.

There are other instances when arguers agree on some set of “facts” but disagree on how they should be labeled or characterized. For example, we may agree that a friend of ours has taken a car, but disagree on whether to call that fact “borrowing” or “stealing.”



## SECOND STASIS: CAUSE

If we agree that something exists or happened, we may next naturally question what brought it about. Causes are usually matters of probable argument rather than factual demonstration when people are involved, since it is usually impossible to recreate human events in order to test a causal hypothesis, while controlling all the potentially influential variables.

Predictions—forecasts of what will happen—are essentially questions about cause since our speculations about what might happen depend on what causes we think could bring about a certain effect, whether we think those causes are likely to occur, and whether we agree upon what kinds of effects a certain event might cause.

## THIRD STASIS: VALUE (OR QUALITY OR EVALUATION)

Many perspectives can gather around questions of quality and value. What quality does the thing have? Is it good or bad of its kind, beautiful or ugly, moral or immoral, or at any of the fine gradations between these extremes? These disagreements can also concern what kind of evaluation to make in the first place. Should a person, a politician for example, be judged only in one area of performance, or for character overall? Should a work of art be evaluated morally, or only aesthetically?

Often participants in a discussion about values find they actually share the same values but disagree over how to weight or order them according to importance in a given case. They must use some key value to help them create a hierarchy of other values from most to least important.

## FOURTH STASIS: ACTION

If we agree that a situation exists and we evaluate it negatively, we next naturally ask what, if anything, can be done about it. (In fact, one argumentative strategy pushes to action as the issue under debate, as though agreement existed on the preceding issues. Rebuttal then requires moving the issue back down the stases.)

There can be many different arguments over what the best possible course of action might be. Thus arguments in this stasis frequently concern feasibility and trade-offs. We can often agree on what should be done ideally, but not on what is actually possible given the available resources. We can also debate who has the authority or responsibility to take action; in fact, some arguments for courses of action spend much of their time trying to “create” an audience that will act.

We can also agree that a situation exists and evaluate it positively, concurring that we'd like to see the situation maintained (although others might argue against us). Maintaining the *status quo* and arguing that we *should* maintain it also belong within the action stasis.

## QUESTIONS OF JURISDICTION

During an argument in any of the preceding stases, but particularly in questions of evaluation and action, someone may challenge someone else's right to conduct or even to participate in

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the discussion. Does a particular group have the right to make decisions about the issue? Is one group interfering in another's domain? How do we determine the appropriate forum in which to conduct the argument?

Jurisdictional arguments can be raised in many kinds of controversies. Is it America's right to evaluate China's human rights policies? Do certain powers belong to Congress, to the States, or to the people? Who has the right to decide what a person can do with his or her body? Because such questions do not directly tackle the arguments advanced within the four stases outlined above, they form a separate stasis. Jurisdiction, however, does not follow the first four stases in sequential order. Instead, it is a kind of underlying stasis which attempts to shift the conversation to a different forum or to redistribute the authority for making decisions about the subject. It is ultimately a question of who can debate and who can decide.

### SETTING AN ISSUE"

eful stage in the arts of inquiry, discussion, and case can try to set or change the issue to their

tion to cause, to value, to action) is an important ences of setting an issue in a certain stasis. Setting frequently assumes agreement in the first or second unwarranted. An arguer may propose action for a problem. The audience is pressured to see the a solution has been proposed. Similarly, in some the first or second stasis will immediately create case for the disappearance of a certain species of eptive audiences as a call to action (fourth stasis).

the point here about stasis theory: the who in the overriding question "Should high school stasis is that question? That's pretty simple—the articles only discussing action? Let's co

Jim Anderson's "yes" argument begins v he points out that there has been "consid school boards have considered or taken act what has happened. He makes a point that controversial point, as far as he is concerned.

He then goes on to say that what is me graph two), and that's the "approximately meeting. Again, he's making a point about controversial. He notes that "These schoo and their efforts, and not as a result of juc fessional, if not moral, responsibility to do so." In terms of the stases, he's suggesting *why*