

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

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**Timeframe:** 50 minutes

**Target Audience:** This lesson targets first-year composition students learning to structure sophisticated arguments and thesis statements, though it may be adapted to any writing class that requires instruction in nuanced argument. The lesson is designed to follow instruction on how to formulate basic thesis statements, building upon the previous material by allowing students to practice their thesis-generating skills while adding irony to their “tool belts” as an argument strategy.

**Materials needed (including preparation):** Jonathan Swift’s “A Modest Proposal” (for students to read and *annotate* in advance); “Modest Proposals: Isn’t It Ironic?” activity handout (one copy for every two or three students, depending on class size); whiteboard and markers; and paper and writing implements

Prior to beginning the lesson, write the agenda on board:

1. Review strategies for generating thesis statements
2. Analyze and discuss irony in “A Modest Proposal”
3. Conduct “dueling thesis statements” individual activity
4. Conduct “modest proposals” group activity
5. Wrap up

**Objectives:** 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.

## **Introduction to Lesson [5 minutes]:**

Last class, 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.

## **Procedures [45 minutes]:**

### **Step 1: Thesis Statement Review [10 minutes]**

- 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.

Now that we’ve reviewed basic thesis building, let’s look at one way to make your argument more sophisticated. Sometimes, the best way to make a convincing point is not to say exactly what you mean but to use the gap between what you mean and what you say to strengthen your argument.

### **Step 2: Definition of Irony [10 minutes]**

First, let’s have some volunteers explain their understanding of irony and provide examples.

Students are often afraid of irony because they think of it as a big, slippery concept that even Alanis Morissette got wrong. Fear no more—it’s not as difficult as you think. In fact, I can almost guarantee you use irony every day. While you may not be old enough to remember when Alanis Morissette was popular, as part of the “millennial” generation you are possibly the most ironic generation to have ever existed. 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).

Now that we have a basic understanding of irony, can you think of any other examples you’ve come across in your daily lives?

### **Step 3: Irony in “A Modest Proposal”: Individual Hands-on Activity [15 minutes]**

#### **Step 3a: Jonathan Swift and Irony [5 minutes]**

Now that we understand irony, let’s look at how Jonathan Swift uses irony to make his point. Can one student volunteer to provide a quick summary of Swift’s text?

On the surface, eating babies to ease societal ills sounds ludicrous, but Swift had a purpose in mind by choosing to argue this claim, and though he is being sarcastic, his essay is still persuasive. A show of hands: who thinks Swift is sincerely advocating the consumption of babies to combat poverty and squalor in 1700s Ireland?

#### **Step 3b: Individual Activity: Dueling Thesis Statements [10 minutes]**

So what *is* Swift arguing? What is his thesis statement if we had to distill it further? Let’s first take his argument at face value: if we ignore the irony, what would his thesis be?

- 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.

Now let’s consider his argument through the lens of irony. What is he really arguing? Read between the lines to discern what Swift’s true point is.

- Give students another three minutes to write what they believe Swift is arguing with his use of irony, creating a thesis with a claim, reason, and “so what?”
- Have a few students share their theses with the class.
- Model an ironic thesis on the board: “The poverty in Ireland (and the ruling class’s inattention to it) has become so horrifying as to be unbelievable, and the only way to get the attention of those who can fix this problem is to present a solution equally as ridiculous: the eating of babies.”
- Ask students for examples from the text that support this statement.

Before we move on to the group activity, does anyone have further questions about irony or how to use it?

#### **Step 4: Group Activity [15 minutes]**

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.

- Practice with example #1 on the worksheet, modeling the claim, reason, and “so what?” on the board to demonstrate how students can incorporate irony.
- Ask students to take 10 minutes to write thesis statements on the worksheet.
- Share with the rest of the class, making adjustments when necessary.

#### **Closure/Evaluation [2 minutes]:**

You will be surprised by how often you notice irony in your everyday lives now that you know how to identify it.

- Ask students what they understand about irony now compared to before this discussion.
- Have students write one thing they did not understand on note cards; address those questions at the opening of next class.

**Lesson 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.