### *Creating an Informed and Argumentative Thesis Sentence*
*Maria A.N. Judnick*
*Department of English and Comparative Literature*
*San José State University*

**Timeframe:** 50-60 minutes

**Target Audience:** Students starting a new in-class unit about learning to write an argumentative essay

**Materials needed:** Projector, student journals, images to tape or pin around the classroom, and handouts on art and thesis statements

**Objectives:** After the activity, students will be able to

- learn to identify and write an informed opinion sentence (thesis).
- identify and edit poorly defended thesis sentences.

## Introduction to Lesson [2 minutes]:

"How often are you asked to give your opinion? How often do you hear people offering their opinions on TV, the radio, or the Internet and realize these commentators are not informed on the subject? Today, we are going to learn how to ensure your opinion will always be taken seriously. How are we going to do that? In just a moment, you are going to become an art critic."

## Procedures [45 minutes]:

### Step 1: Establishing Opinions through Journal Work [15 minutes]

#### Step 1A: Writing Initial Thoughts [3 minutes]
Tell students to pull out their journals/scratch paper. Have them reflect on the following prompts:

1. Define the word "art" in your own words.
2. How do you know if something is art?

(If students still have time, they can answer the optional question: What is your favorite art piece?)

While students are writing in their journals, start pinning/taping the art images around the room.

#### Step 1B: Sharing Student Opinions [10 minutes]
Discuss student responses. You may want to **make a list** on the board for their definitions and qualifications of art. Be sure to **challenge their definitions** to keep expanding the discussion further.

Here are some sample discussion questions:

- Would you consider something to be art if your five-year-old niece/nephew/brother/sister created it?
- Does a piece have to be in a museum to be considered art?

- Does a piece have to be expensive for it to be considered art?
- If you don't like an art piece, would you still consider it art? Why?

Below is the definition I have combined from various sources. I read it aloud to students and discuss the connections to their answers.

**Art**: *noun***,** the expression or application of human creative skill and imagination that produces works to be appreciated primarily for their beauty or emotional power. Art is typically considered to be a visual form such as a painting or sculpture (but has recently been expanding to more diverse mediums).

**Step 1C: Making Connections [2 minutes]**
Show this humorous commercial (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ap89uPrNUFI) with Amy Poehler and explain that while she parodies the role of art critics, their job is very important. Explain that an **art critic** is someone who specializes in analyzing, interpreting, and evaluating art. Critics are generally experts in art history who have developed an eye for identifying quality work. In modern/contemporary art, some critics explain the artist's vision to the public by reading and analyzing the artist's manifesto (theory/philosophy behind the work). Just because an art critic does not value the work of an artist in his or her lifetime does not mean it is worthless. Future generations might enjoy those pieces!

**Step 2: Studying Art [15 minutes]**

**Step 2A: Viewing the Art Gallery [5 minutes]**
Pass out the "What is Art?" handout to help students as they go around evaluating pieces in the "classroom gallery." For this gallery, students must contemplate each piece **silently** without consulting any classmates or the instructor.

**Step 2B: Making Quick Opinions [2 minutes]**
Once students are finished, they will return to their seats. After all students are seated, vote on whether the class thinks each image is art or not. Have students share quick opinions on these pieces.

**Step 2C: Offering an Informed Opinion [8 minutes]**
Discuss each of the art pieces including their construction and reception (see key below). Then, ask students if knowing this information changes their opinion about these works.

[**KEY: All** of these pieces are considered art. Some works were popular immediately after their creation while others are still unappreciated. **All** of the pieces are unconventional and have a unique construction that must be studied in order to appreciate the artist's work.

1. Pearblossom Highway – David Hockney, 1986 – This piece is a very large (77x112 ½ in.) photographic collage of photos by a highly respected British artist.
2. Broadway and 68th – Oil on Canvas – Richard Estes, 2012 – Estes is part of the photorealism movement (not all critics value this group). For this movement, artists take a photo of an everyday moment or scene.  They then take six months to a year or more to replicate this same image in a detailed, realistic painting. The artist wants a viewer to wonder if his or her work is a picture or a painting.
3. Spiral Jetty – Robert Smithson, 1970 – Smithson was an earthwork artist. Built on the northeastern shore of the Great Salt Lake in Utah, this piece consists entirely of mud, salt crystals, basalt rocks, and water. It is a 1,500-foot-long (460 m), 15-foot-wide

(4.6 m) counterclockwise coil jutting from the shore of the lake. The jetty can be seen in times of drought and submerged during times of normal precipitation. *Spiral Jetty* is now largely white against pink due to salt encrustation.

4. Trans-fixed – Chris Burden, 1974** – Chris Burden is a controversial performance artist. This still from a performance in Venice, CA is best described as, "Nails are driven through his palms onto the roof of the car. The garage door was opened and the car was pushed half way out into the speedway. […] the engine was run at full speed for two minutes. After two minutes, the engine was turned off and the car pushed back into the garage. The door was closed.  The documentation of Burden's performance recalls images of a crucified Jesus, but instead of a cross, Burden is nailed to a Volkswagen—'the car of the people,' in Burden's terms" (Kuriyama, Emily Anne. "Everything You Need to Know about Chris Burden's Art Through His Greatest Works." *Complex* Magazine. October 2013).  **The video of Chris Burden's performance is currently unavailable on YouTube.

5. Onement 1 – Barnett Newman – 1948 – Newman was an abstract expressionist. The thin line running down the middle of the painting is called a "zip" which he felt expressed both division and unification of feelings. Many of his later zip paintings related to religious imagery using only colors.]

**Step 3: Writing an Opinion [7 minutes]**
Pass out the handout and go through the student thesis examples about Leonardo DaVinci's *Mona Lisa* on the Word document projected in the classroom. Ask students to decide which of these thesis statements are the best and why. (Each of these sentences could still benefit from further edits.) Then, have them practice writing at least one original thesis statement based on the art they studied. Share with a partner and the class.

**Step 4: Applying Opinions [8 minutes]**
Ask students to identify and edit some uninformed or poorly written thesis sentences on other topics. Review appropriate answers. (If students do not finish, assign the rest of the sentences for homework.)

## Closure/Evaluation [3 minutes]:

Remind students that this process is one they need to consider for ALL thesis sentences. There are more options for ways to organize an informed thesis/opinion sentence. I ask students for homework to a) edit the thesis sentence they are working on for the unit or b) try to create a thesis statement for their current paper assignment. We will discuss those sentences at the start of the next class.

**Lesson Analysis:**

Students love to become an expert in class. While some students have no background in art and can find it frustrating to realize that all of the examples are art, other students love to show their knowledge if they recognize any images.

After this activity, I tend to notice stronger thesis sentences for the next essay. However, this lesson should be paired with a lesson about essay organization to emphasize that the thesis is a roadmap for a well-structured essay.
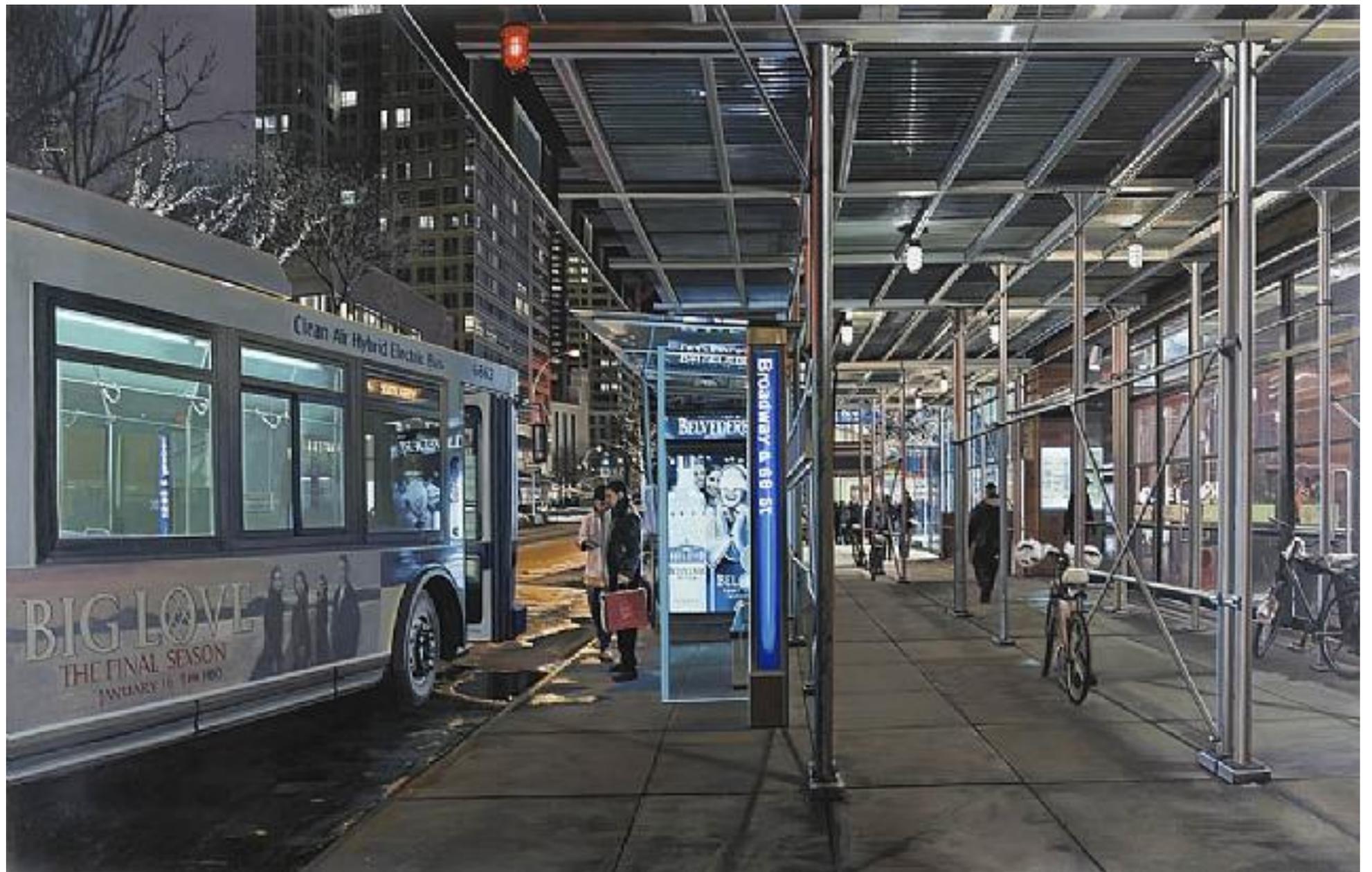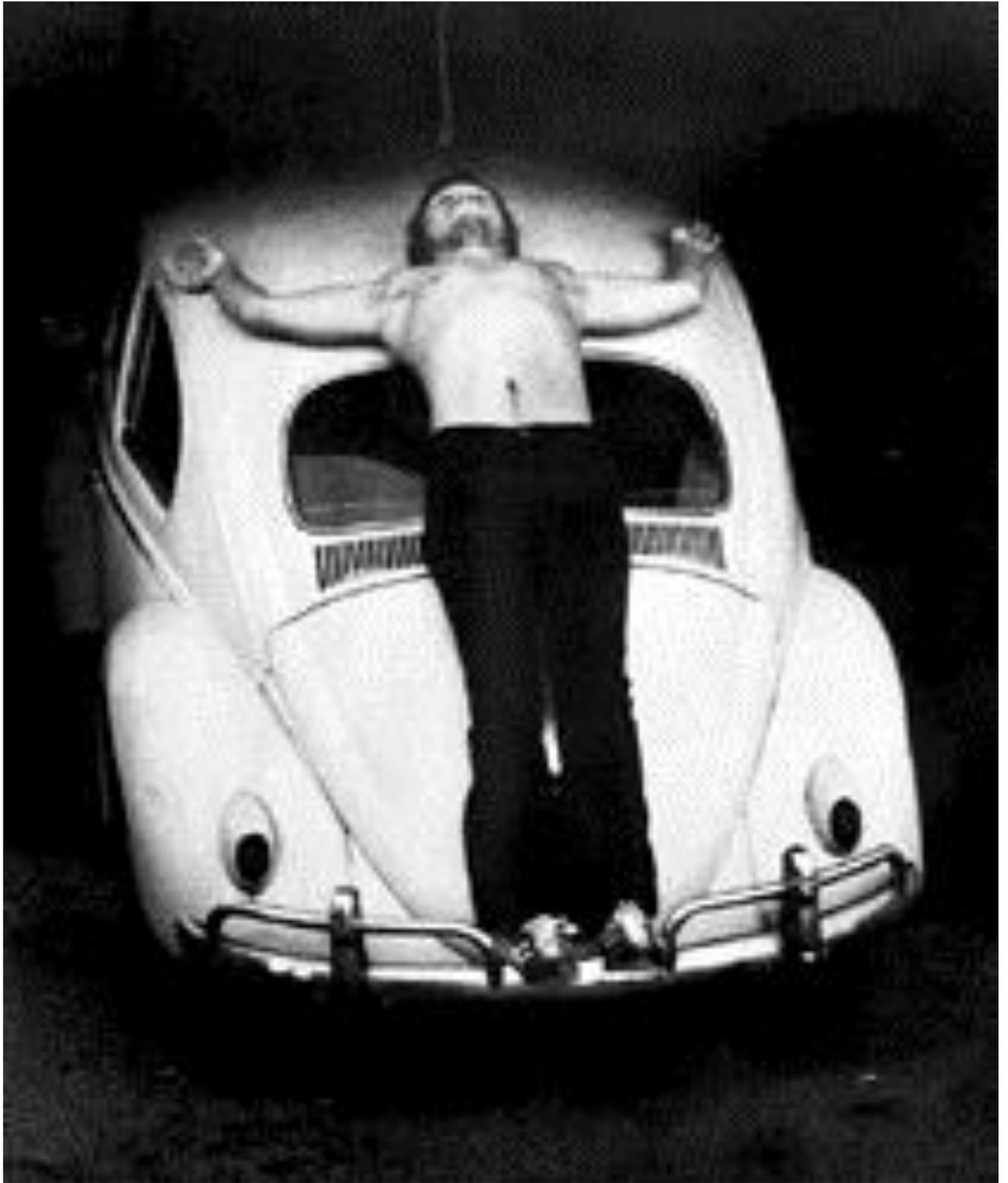
Image 1

Image 2

Image 3

Image 4

Image 5

# Is it Art?

Read through the following categories before you evaluate the pieces. <u>Do not</u> use all these questions—they are for your inspiration.

**For each piece, note the number assigned to it. Describe the piece in your journal and explain how it makes you feel. THEN, note whether or not you like it AND WHY.**

Describe:
- ❖List what you think you know about the work—the artist, title, or date. If you know any background information on the artist, feel free to include it here.
- ❖What are your first impressions of the work? Write a list of the original reactions.
- ❖Describe what you see in the piece. Is this art realistic? What do you think the piece is about? Are there recognizable images? Describe what you think are the technical qualities of the work (e.g., tools, materials, instruments).

Analyze/Interpret:
- ❖What mood or emotions does the artwork communicate?
- ❖Why do you think that artist created this work?
- ❖What do you think is the meaning of the piece?

Evaluate:
- ❖Do you think this piece is effective? In other words, do you like this image? Why or why not?
- ❖Has your impression changed since your first impression?

Choosing the Best Opinion

Read the following student sentences offering an opinion about Leonardo daVinci's *Mona Lisa*. Put a star next to what you believe is the clearest/most informed sentence that could serve as a great thesis. Be sure to edit sentences as appropriate.

(Keep in mind the definition of a **thesis**: the sentence(s) that captures the writer's position on the main point, idea, or central message of a paper. Remember: your thesis statement should tell your reader what the paper is about while helping to guide your writing and keep your argument focused.)

1. Da Vinci's *Mona Lisa* is a famous painting because of how the woman is smiling.

2. *Mona Lisa* is a painting by Leonardo da Vinci and one of the most famous works of art in the world.

3. Da Vinci's *Mona Lisa* shows how a work of art can be significant in communication, engagement of the audience, and eliciting various thematic expressions and feelings in a very important manner.

4. The mysterious smile of the woman in Leonardo Da Vinci's *Mona Lisa* has intrigued audiences for centuries—however, it is more than a smile that has earned this work the distinction of being the most visited, viewed, written and sung about painting in the world.

5. The point of *Mona Lisa* as painted by da Vinci is said to be to show off how beautiful the wife of a famous cloth merchant from Florence was.

6. I and other critics like da Vinci's *Mona Lisa* and, in this paper, I'm going to tell you three reasons why.

Questions to discuss with a partner:
1. How does the sentence you picked reflect the definition of a thesis sentence?
2. How do the other sentences not fulfill that definition?

Now, you try. Pick one of the pieces we studied today and offer a thesis statement about it below. (For example, you may want to argue about why it does/does not deserve to be classified as art.)

_____

_____

_____

Adding Details and Opinions to Thesis Sentences

Now that you've practiced your thesis writing skills, pick <u>at least three</u> of these vague thesis sentences to edit. Think about ways to add **details/information** and **specific/stronger wording** to help convey an opinion.

---

**Example**
**Original thesis**: There are advantages and disadvantages to using statistics.
**Options for Edits**:
1. Careful manipulation of data allows a researcher to use statistics to support any claim she desires.
2. To ensure accurate reporting, journalists must understand the real significance of the statistics they report.
3. Because advertisers consciously and unconsciously manipulate data, every consumer should learn how to evaluate statistical claims.

---

1. There are literally millions of reasons why you shouldn't let babies watch R-rated movies.
   Edit: _____

   _____

2. The economic situation there is bad.
   Edit: _____

   _____

3. Rock and Roll has played an important role in U.S. culture since the beginning of time.
   Edit: _____

   _____

4. *The Fault in Our Stars* is really the saddest movie ever because someone died.
   Edit: _____

   _____

5. Technology is detrimental to child development.
   Edit: _____

   _____

6. There are many arguments both for and against gun control.
   Edit: _____

   _____

7. In today's society, more and more people are becoming obese.
   Edit: _____

   _____

8. I will show the negative effects of not studying for a test.
   Edit: _____

   _____

9. College is better than high school.
   Edit: _____

   _____

10. The legal drinking age should be lowered here because other countries already did so.
    Edit: _____

    _____