

STASIS THEORY

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First developed in classical times, stasis theory has been revived in various forms by a number of modern rhetoricians. Read more about stasis theory in this article: Fahnestock, Jeanne, and Marie Secor, "The Stases in Scientific and Literary Argument." *Written Communication* 5 (1988): 427-443.

The word "stasis" (plural "stases") literally means a "slowing down" or a stopping point. In rhetoric, a stasis is an issue that may be contested or a question that needs to be resolved before the argument can proceed.

The stases are expressed in the form of standard, recurrent kinds of question that arguments settle—questions that can be modified to apply to any given subject matter. Some theorists identify three stases (questions of fact, value, and policy). Others, including me, find it more useful to identify five stases at which disagreement may need to be resolved through argument. *Examples in italics are typical questions raised in a court of law, where progression through the stases, in the classical sequence from fact to policy, is most commonly found:*

Fact	What happens or what happened? What are the facts of the subject? <i>What happened on the night of July 6, 1973?</i>
Definition	How should we name or classify the subject? <i>Were the defendant=s actions illegal? Was the defendant legally sane during the shooting?</i>
Cause/Effect	What caused the subject? Or, what consequences may result from it? <i>What motivated the defendant to commit the crime? What happened to the plaintiff as a result of the crime?</i>
Value	How good or bad is the subject? Is it right or wrong? <i>How serious was the defendant=s offense? How bad were his or her actions?</i>
Policy	What action should be taken concerning the subject? <i>Should the defendant be convicted or found not guilty? What sentence should the defendant receive?</i>

Stasis theory provides a way to classify the kind of argument that's being made (or the kind that *should* be made in order to engage and persuade a particular audience). Stasis theory can help you in at least two ways:

- 1) As a heuristic—a system for generating things to say about a subject or angles from which to approach the subject in an argumentative paper. It can help you develop an argument you are trying to make. You can ask yourself, "What questions can I generate about this issue at each of the stases? Given the audience for this paper, which stasis or stases should I address most carefully, in what sequence, and why?"
- 2) As a method of critiquing other people's arguments. You can ask yourself, "Which stases has the rhetor given most attention in this paper, why, and were those choices effective?" These questions can help you understand the author's sense of what the audience already accepts and what needs to be argued.

The stases lend themselves to being addressed in sequence, and court cases tend to progress through the stases in sequence. However, a particular case may skip some stases that aren't at issue and focus on one or two stases on which the outcome hinges. The interesting thing for rhetoricians is to notice which stases are given the most attention in any given debate, and to think about why the argument dwells on those stases.

1st stasis: FACT: argues about what happens or what happened.

Note the difference between presenting already-established facts as supporting material in an argument and arguing about what the facts are. The difference is whether the facts are disputed or accepted by those involved. If the facts are in question, then there needs to be debate at the fact stasis. Here are some examples of questions that address the fact stasis:

What happens to time and space in the vicinity of a black hole? (We don't know for sure.)

How did the dinosaurs become extinct? (There are different theories.)

Was the Biblical flood a historical reality?

Where did the bullets that killed John F. Kennedy come from?

What exactly did X (defendant, accused of murder) do to Y (victim)?

Was the Unabomber manifesto written on the typewriter found in Ted Kazinski's cabin?

Was John Malvo the triggerman in all the East Coast "sniper" murders of 2002?

Where was O.J. Simpson at 10 p.m. on the night of Nicole Simpson's murder, and what was he doing?

Did David Kingston marry his niece and commit incest with her, as she has claimed?

Was David Kingston with his first wife (as she claimed) or with his niece (as *she* claimed) at the motel in Park City the night his niece alleges Kingston slept with her as his 15th wife?

How many civilians have been killed in the Iraq war? (It's a debatable number.)

2nd stasis: DEFINITION: characterizes the subject in relation to some other terms or ideas.

Arguments at this stasis try to identify or classify the subject. They often debate the meaning of terminology. (Stasis theory itself argues at this stasis, since it's about classifying arguments into different kinds. To ask "at what stasis is this argument being made?" is to raise a question at the definition stasis.) Here are some other examples of questions at the definition stasis:

If X did kill Y, can it be considered murder, manslaughter, or a killing in self-defense?

Was the murder of Y a "hate crime"?

Was the defendant mentally competent to stand trial?

Before the tanker *Exxon Valdez* ran aground and spilled oil in Alaska's Prince William Sound, Exxon had developed a contingency plan for such accidents. Was this plan, as Exxon maintained, merely a "suggestion" or could it be considered a binding "guarantee" that a spillage would be safely contained? Was Exxon guilty of "deliberate deception" or just "misassumptions" about what might happen if a tanker ran aground? At what point in the clean-up process can an oil-fouled beach be considered "clean"?

If an informal marriage ceremony was indeed conducted between David Kingston and his niece, did it make her his wife?

Can the conflict in Iraq be classified as a civil war?

3rd stasis: CAUSE (or effect): tries to establish a causal relationship between events.

Arguments at this stasis can look back in time to establish causes (e.g. event B was caused by event A) or they can look forward to predict likely consequences or effects (e.g. event B will probably lead to event C). Here are some questions that address the cause stasis:

Did X have any motive for killing Y? Did X profit in any way from Y's death?

Did the oil spilled in Prince William Sound all come from the tanker *Exxon Valdez*, or did some come from other ships or natural underwater seepage from the rocks?

Were Gulf War veterans' illnesses caused by exposure to chemical weapons?

Did David Kingston's niece offer authorities different versions of her testimony because she had fabricated it or because she feared she might be returned to her polygamous clan and get into trouble for having revealed clan secrets?

Why has the conflict in Iraq proven so hard to resolve?

What would be the consequences if the U.S. withdrew from Iraq in the next year?

4th stasis: VALUE: how good or bad is the subject? Is it (or was it) right or wrong?

Where would the subject be on a scale of morality?

Arguments at earlier stases tend to build towards this one. Below are some questions addressing the value stasis:

Was the murder of Y made more heinous by the way in which it was done (e.g. slowly, with torture, in front of Y's family)?

Did the abuse the Menendez brothers received from their parents in any way mitigate their crime (murdering their parents), or was it inexcusable?

Is it ethical for Utah universities to invest in tobacco companies? (This argument borders on the definition stasis.)

How suitable is each of the candidates for mayor of Logan?

Is polygamy morally wrong? In all cases?

Whose testimony was more reliable—David Kingston's and the defense witnesses' or his niece's?

If the U.S. does manage to establish democratic freedom in Iraq, will it be worth the price in military and civilian lives?

5th stasis: POLICY: what should be done about the subject?

Arguments at this stasis **always look to the future**, considering what action or stance, out of the available alternatives, should be taken. Notice all the "shoulds" in these questions at the policy stasis:

Should Utah universities divest their stocks in tobacco companies?

Which of the candidates should be elected mayor of Logan?

How long should David Kingston be sent to prison for his convictions on two counts of incest and unlawful sex with his niece?

Should the anti-polygamy laws be enforced on all polygamists, or should they be left alone unless they are also committing child abuse and incest?

Should the U.S. withdraw from Iraq in the near future, even if a stable democracy has not been established there?

Arguments become stalemated and violent when people fail to agree at one of the stases. In general, the lower the stasis where such a deadlock occurs, the less the chance of the two sides ever reaching agreement or resolution. For example:

Abortion: The “pro-life” and “pro-choice” sides agree at the stasis of fact—on what happens in conception and abortion—but they tend to disagree at the stasis of definition (at what point does a fertilized egg become a human being, or is it a person from the moment of conception?), which may be the biggest issue in the debate. This may be why it’s so hard for opponents to agree, or even to understand each other, when they try to argue abortion at the higher stases of value or policy.

Euthanasia: If a person is in a coma, is brain dead, and depends on machines to maintain vital signs, we might argue at the definition stasis about whether the person is “alive” and what it means to be alive. In the case of Jack Kevorkian’s patients, who were alert and communicative, argument could focus on the fact stasis (what was the patient’s condition?) the definition stasis (the patient was clearly alive, but was he/she legally fit to make a life-or-death decision?) the cause/effect stasis (what was the patient’s prognosis and was there hope of a cure or relief?) or value—is it morally right or wrong to assist suicide? (Discussion over whether people have a constitutional right to die addresses the definition stasis, since it’s a technical, legal question, but it also shades into the value stasis because it’s a morally loaded question. It’s a definition with ethical implications.)

Capital punishment: For individual cases, the definition stasis is resolved in the courtroom as attorneys argue whether or not the defendant’s actions match the legal definition of a crime punishable by death). However, individual cases tend to stir up a perennial debate in our society over the general issue of capital punishment. Like euthanasia, the issue tends to become deadlocked at the stasis of value (is it moral to take a criminal’s life?), although there is also disagreement at the stasis of cause/effect (does the death penalty deter other would-be criminals?).