

Thesis Flipping
Jeremy Davis
jeremydavis@uga.edu

Has this ever happened to you?:

“Ugh, I was hoping to defend X [some particular thesis] in my paper, and then I proceeded to work really hard on it, but eventually I came to see that the way I was going about defending X wasn’t going to work, or there was some objection that seemed to me to count decisively against X. And this is incredibly frustrating, because I’ve put in all this time and effort, and now I’m left with a paper that defends a thesis I am now convinced can’t be defended—or at least not in the way I’ve invested myself in trying to do so. So I’m stuck, because I still need to write a good paper for the class, but I’m left with this thesis I can no longer defend.”

I’ve talked with countless students over the years who have found themselves in this scenario. They usually arrive in my office a few days before the due date (sometimes much later than that, unfortunately), and after some discussion of their claims, leave my office incredibly discouraged, now seeing more clearly that their thesis—and, more specifically, the argument they give in defense of it—is now much less plausible than they had initially thought.

It’s frustrating and stressful—believe me, I get it. The first thing I’ll tell you is: this is just philosophy. Ideas seem plausible, and then often less so once they’re challenged carefully.

But also, the problem isn’t nearly as dire as it often seems. In fact, there’s a hack you should know about. I call it *thesis flipping*.

Suppose you want to defend hedonism in your paper. Your thesis, in essence, is:

“In this paper, I will argue that hedonism is the correct theory of well-being.”

But as you write, you come to find that the pathway you took for defending that claim turns out to be inadequate. Maybe the novel example you’ve crafted doesn’t quite work in the way you had thought, and through thinking hard about it, you now see more clearly why that is so. Or maybe you thought you had some clever reply to the Experience Machine thought experiment, but after working through it more, you now see that it doesn’t quite vindicate hedonism after all.

The problem, in short, is that through the process of writing, you’ve come to think differently about the topic—more specifically, the thesis you originally thought was true. But you’ve done all this work, and the deadline is rapidly approaching.

Normally, this would seem to spell disaster, as we can see in the quote at the beginning of this piece. But what if you could fix the problem simply by changing the thesis and slightly reframing the argument? So, instead of: “In this paper, I will argue that hedonism is the correct theory of well-being,” your thesis becomes:

“In this paper, I will argue against hedonism by showing that an intuitively plausibly route for defending hedonism suffers from certain specific problems.”

In other words, you take what you learned through the course of writing and thinking hard on the topic, and you use *that* as your thesis. That is, you *flip* your thesis.

If this seems weird to you, remember that scholars do this all the time in other fields. Suppose a scientist has a hypothesis that **X** is true, and runs an experiment, and then comes to see that, actually, **X** is false. This isn't a failure: we have learned something! And this is so despite the fact that the initial hypothesis was incorrect. Furthermore, identifying exactly why **X** is false, despite the initial educated intuition that it was actually true, is incredibly informative. After all, if the scientist had good reason to believe **X** was true, then it's quite interesting that it turned out not to be! The scientist who arrives at this conclusion has helped us in our journey toward truth and understanding. And they certainly have learned something themselves.

The same, I suggest, is true of philosophical thinking and writing. If you were thinking hard about a view, and thought there was this really interesting objection to a view, but came to see that it didn't succeed, articulating this also helps us on our journey toward truth and understanding. And surely in the process of doing this, you have learned something too.

So, thesis flipping—the act of rewriting your thesis to better reflect what you've actually come to believe is the strongest view or argument—is not only an acceptable method for writing in my classes, but it is also an honest and careful intellectual approach that is used, in essence, across disciplines.

Naturally, I'd much rather you develop your thought this way, and articulate why things are not as they had initially seemed, than have you take a forced stance on a view you now think is probably false (or at least not defensible in the way you had thought). This seems to me intellectually dishonest, and frustrates some of the central aims of philosophical education.

Of course, doing this is not entirely cost-free. It requires reframing the paper somewhat: you might need to set up the example you use differently, or to rewrite the structure of the introduction, and so on. But this can be done—and certainly it's better to do this than to start from square one. Moreover, you don't lose the bulk of the hard work you've already put into the paper.

Now, I do not necessarily advocate starting your paper with this approach in mind. You do best when you push yourself to defend a view the best you can, particularly if you have thought hard about it already. Working through objections and challenges is what makes you a better thinker. Don't give up whenever you hit a snag. At the same time, though, don't force yourself to defend a view merely because you've already started down that path.

Let me note, in closing, that you might have other philosophy professors who aren't so keen on this approach. Maybe they have more narrow pedagogical aims for the assignment, or something of this nature. So this is an approach that works in my classes, but might not (unfortunately) generalize to the rest of your philosophical education. This is probably in part due to the fact that this sort of approach would likely not work in professional philosophy—i.e., for publications in academic journals. But obviously that's not what we're doing here. We are just trying to make progress on your thinking, while you're still early in your philosophical journey. Working through how initially compelling ideas turned out not to be so compelling in the end is not only fascinating, it is also part-and-parcel of a rich philosophical education.