Course Warmup: Stasis Theory or What Do I Write About?

In a writing class, the most common question is “what should I write about?” This question has been around since the sophists, the first teachers of writing. A way of answering that question has been around for almost as long. The answer is stasis theory. Stasis theory was invented by Hermagoras of Temnos (c. 150 BCE). “Stasis” is Greek for strife or immobility. But strife with whom, immobility over what? To understand how such an idea could apply to writing we need to back up and think about why we write.

We are all members of communities—groups of people that have common concerns. We may be members of a family for example, or a church congregation, or a service organization. We are all members of a state and a country. Within these communities, we have common concerns that we speak or write about; in other words, we conduct discourse. When we write, we write as part of a discourse community. This class—your teacher, the other students, and the people you bring into the class through what you read—is a discourse community. But again, what does this have to do with what you will write about or Hermagoras of Temnos?

You will write because you disagree—or have strife or immobility—with one or more members of your discourse community. And the what-should-I-write-about question will depend on what you disagree about. For example, say that your class is reading about and discussing Utah’s recently passed English Only Law, and while discussing this law with a classmate, you discover that you disagree. Your classmate thinks the law is a good idea. “After all,” she argues, “if you are going to be in America and want to participate in our society you should learn the language used in education, commerce, and government. Besides, why should taxes be spent to print government documents in different languages when most people speak English?” “But wait a minute,” you
say, “the cost of printing government documents in the native tongue of a legal immigrant is minimal and it can help that person get a driver’s license so they can work or understand government policies that may help them to naturalize. Besides, a law like that seems to only hurt the most vulnerable in our society.”

What we have here is a point of stasis. Hermagoras would be proud. You now both have something to write about, and it is something real, something that you are interested in, something that concerns your discourse community. You are not just fulfilling an assignment, you are engaged in real inquiry, a term we will discuss a little later. But what’s the next step? Answer a few questions about stasis, and we will talk about question at issue.

Answer questions | Next module