Appendix 5
Taking apart an argument to understand the sub-propositions (3c)

Dealing with Evidence: Secondary Sources

c. Give the students an argument and ask them what secondary and supporting points would have to be proven for it to be true

Bottleneck: Students often do not pause to consider what propositions must be affirmed for a thesis to be convincing. They dash into finding evidence in papers without considering what evidence will be crucial for the argument they are making.

What needs to be modeled: Students need to be able to deconstruct a thesis and consider what points would need to be demonstrated before this position is convincing to skeptical readers.

Assessment: In an effort to see to what extent students had mastered this art after they had received feedback on their first long paper an on-line assignment in the 12th week asked students to do the following:

Imagine that you were writing a paper in which you were defending this thesis:

The late 19th and early 20th century racist and fascist writers all shared a need to define themselves and the group that they identified with by excluding others. They divided humanity into two different species, "us" and "them," and projected everything they saw as evil onto the "other" that they had created.

1) Give the most important claim that you would have to defend in order to support this thesis.
2) In the space below give a second claim that you would have to defend in order to support the thesis.
3) Find a passage from Adolf Hitler’s Mein Kampf that makes one of the claims you have described above more credible.
4) Write a sentence from the hypothetical paper that would make clear to your readers how the passage makes this part of the thesis more credible.
Examples of different levels of response:

High

Claims to be defended
1) Racist and fascist writers created a sense of community by excluding others.
2) Racists and fascists projected evils onto the outsiders.

Evidence from Mein Kampf supporting these claims
3) “Here he stops at nothing, and in his vileness he becomes so gigantic that no one need be surprised if among our people the personification of the devil as the symbol of all evil assumes the living shape of the Jew.

Sentence from hypothetical paper making this argument
4) Here Hitler reaches the pinnacle of his attacks against the "outsiders". After racially separating the Jews from the Aryans, it can now be seen what evils and how they were being placed upon the "outsiders". After attributing the struggles of the new industrial world, Marxist revolutionary tendencies, and cultural bastardization to the Jewish "race", Hitler sums up all of these Jewish evils most powerfully by comparing the devil to the Jew. Hitler attributed many evils to the "other" and summed these accusations up very powerfully in this final passage.

This student clearly knew how to see the elements in the thesis and to provide evidence supporting those elements.

Medium:

Claims to be defended
1) History supports a racial theory of intermixture vs. purity, with eventual "slave" impurities destroying glorious culture and civilization.
2) A battle between the evil Semite and the good Aryan has existed since eternity.

Evidence from Mein Kampf supporting these claims
3) "Blood mixture and the resultant drop in the racial level is the sole cause of the dying out of old cultures; for men do not perish as a result of lost wars, but by loss of that force of resistance which is contained only in pure blood."

Sentence from hypothetical paper making this argument
4) Here Hitler provides an excuse for his future adventurism and expansion. Only by expanding and continually subjugating inferior peoples while remaining conscious of the bad eugenics of
intermixture can the idealized racial aristocracy (the Aryan) remain superior. Everything that is horrifying of the previous century’s ideological irrationality makes a powerful and emotional appeal here in Mein Kampf. This illogic is so powerful that the most cultured country in Europe within a decade quickly and eagerly become its most barbaric.

This student clearly grasped what had to be demonstrated to support the thesis, but his choice of evidence was not squarely on target, and his discussion of the issue did not stay focused on the thesis.

Low: There were no assignments in which students were unable to identify propositions that must be defend to support this thesis or to use evidence to support one of these propositions.

Conclusions: All the students who completed the assignment understood the basic process of identifying what needs to be defended and finding evidence to support those propositions. Additional repetition may be necessary to assure that these skills are sufficiently internalized that they will actually be deployed in the midst of paper writing