

Developing Your Thesis

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Writing a Thesis Sentence: An Introduction

Few sentences in your paper will vex you as much as the thesis sentence. And with good reason: the thesis sentence is typically that one sentence in the paper with the potential to assert, control, and structure the entire argument. Without a strong, thoughtful thesis, a paper might seem unfocused. So what makes a good thesis sentence?

Despite the differences from discipline to discipline and from course to course, a good thesis will generally have the following characteristics:

A good thesis sentence will make a claim.

A good thesis rarely turns an intellectual problem into a black and white, either/or proposition that the writer will then defend. Rather, a good thesis offers a nuanced and interesting perspective that the writer can develop via careful analysis. This perspective must be more than an observation. For example, "America is violent" is an observation. "Americans are violent because they are fearful" (the position that Michael Moore takes in *Bowling for Columbine*) is an argument. Why? Because it posits a perspective. It makes a claim.

Put another way, a good thesis sentence will inspire (rather than quiet) other points of view. One might argue that America is violent because of its violent entertainment industry. Or because of the proliferation of guns. Or because of the disintegration of the family. In short, if your thesis is positing something that no one can (or would wish to) argue with, then it's not a good thesis.

A good thesis sentence will define the scope of your argument.

Your thesis sentence determines what you will discuss in your paper. It also determines what you won't discuss. Every paragraph in your paper exists in order to support your thesis and its claim. Accordingly, if one of your paragraphs seems irrelevant, you have two choices: get rid of the paragraph, or rewrite your thesis so that it is complex enough to embrace the whole of your argument.

A good thesis will shape your argument.

A good thesis not only signals to the reader what claim you're making, but also suggests *how* your argument will be presented. In other words, your thesis sentence should suggest the structure or shape of your argument to your reader.

Say, for example, that you are going to argue that "American fearfulness expresses itself in two curious ways: A and B." In this case, the reader understands that you are going to have two important points to cover, and that these points will appear in a certain order. If you suggest a particular ordering principle in your thesis and then abandon it, the reader could become confused.

Developing a Thesis: Sample Methods

Professors employ a variety of methods to teach students how to compose good thesis sentences. Here we offer sample methods employed by three instructors from the Institute for Writing and Rhetoric: John Donaghy, Sara Biggs Chaney, and Karen Gocsik. Please note that these methods do not represent a program-wide sense of the thesis and how it should be taught or practiced. There are many approaches which can help students compose a good thesis.

John Donaghy: Finding Patterns, Solving Problems

Professor John Donaghy's method is founded on the understanding that a good thesis comes from good analysis. In his view, analysis is a complicated process that requires readers to break down a text (event, object, or phenomenon) into parts, discovering patterns among the parts, and coming up with a theory for why these patterns exist.

To illustrate how analysis brings us to the development of a thesis, Professor Donaghy suggests three steps regarding a reading of the following Gary Snyder poem, "Pine tree tops:"

In the blue night
frost haze, the sky glows
with the moon
pine tree tops
bend snow-blue, fade
into sky, frost, starlight.
The creak of boots. Rabbit tracks, deer tracks,
what do we know.

First, when analyzing, you need to be conscious of examining parts of a text, looking for patterns (or repeating elements). In a short poem, you can make a number of simple observations, including:

- Number of words (34)
- Number of syllables in words (mostly single syllable)
- Parts of speech: mostly nouns; adjectives are scarce; surprisingly few verbs

Second, you need to try to determine how these parts and patterns are speaking to each other. Do these parts and patterns illustrate a similarity? Draw a contrast? Create an emphasis? Together form a new observation or idea? In terms of the poem:

- Nouns: so many nouns emphasizes the "thing-ness" of the poem
- Adjectives: very few; one (blue) is attached to a noun
- Verbs: the verbs (glows, bend, fade) are gentle, yielding verbs

Finally, you can put forward a proposition. For instance: Snyder builds his poem on nouns to give power to the "things" in his scene. Or Snyder chooses verbs that seem to yield to the nouns in order to tell us how to behave in the presence of nature. This proposition, with some tweaking, can become a working thesis.

Sara Biggs Chaney: Evolving the Thesis by Unpacking the Assumptions & Making Counter-Claims

Professor Sara Chaney uses various methods to help her students arrive at a thesis. One that has proven successful is requiring students to examine their assumptions. Professor Chaney begins this instruction by introducing the student to the enthymeme. Like the syllogism (All men are mortal; Socrates is a man; therefore, Socrates is mortal), the enthymeme has three parts: the major premise, the minor premise, and the conclusion. The difference is that in the case of the syllogism, the major premise is based on fact (All men are mortal), while in the enthymeme it's based on a commonly held belief (cheating is unethical, smoking around children is a danger to their health, etc.). As Professor Chaney notes, in many cases the enthymeme is presented with the major premise left unstated: She smokes around her daughter; she endangers her daughter's health. Professor Chaney illustrates the importance in finding the "missing" major premise, arguing that unpacking an argument's unstated assumptions can help you to better analyze the texts you're writing about, and to create better texts of your own.

The key question to ask is: What must be true about the world in order for this statement to be true? With regard to your premise, try to put forth all hidden assumptions, large and small. This forces you to dig beneath the surface of the text, to explore the structure and the nuance of the argument. In the process, ideas for a thesis will present themselves.

Once you have drafted a thesis, Professor Chaney has a strategy (borrowed from David Rossenwasser and Jill Stephen's *Writing Analytically*) for evolving the thesis by putting forward counter-claims. People sometimes make the mistake of forcing evidence to fit an overly rigid claim, or of presenting their claim in the form of a list, with few connections between the points. To evolve your thesis, begin with the basic claim and then methodically increase the complexity of that claim through the introduction of complicating evidence. This new evidence forces you to redefine your initial claims and to determine how the counter-claim might or might not be accommodated by your thesis.

For instance, you may have written the following thesis: "Reported cases of autism in children have increased by almost 200% in the last twenty years because autism has been redefined to include less severe forms of the disorder." Now consider the following complicating evidence: "Some research also suggests that autism may be linked to mercury exposure in childhood vaccines." you may weigh the evidence to see which has more merit; you might expand your thesis to point to two reasons for rising autism; you might acknowledge the truth in both statements but want to subordinate one argument to the other; you might point out a causal relationship between the two sentences (i.e., has the frequent levels of mercury exposures led to a new definition of autism in the DSM-IV, which in turn has increased the numbers of reported cases of autism?). Using any of these methods, you will have improved your thesis sentences.

Karen Gocsik: Finding the Umbrella Idea

Professor Karen Gocsik advises that developing a good thesis is often the result of finding the "umbrella idea." Finding this idea requires that you move back and forth between a text's particularities and its big ideas in order to find a suitable "fit" between the two that you can write about. This fit is then summed up in the "umbrella idea," or the big idea that all of your observations can stand under.

For instance, in an exploration of the Gospels as rhetoric, a student makes the specific observation that, in three of the four gospels, Jesus is reported as saying dramatically different things during his crucifixion. This observation by itself won't produce a paper - it's simply a statement of fact, with which no one will disagree. Nevertheless, this observation provokes a broader question: do these differences constitute a contradiction in the text? And if so, how do we understand this contradiction? What are the conditions of religious truth? Is there room for a contradiction as important as this?

Of course, these questions are too big to be addressed in an academic paper. And so the student returns to the text, still with these too-big questions haunting her. Reviewing the specific contradictions of the text, she crafts another set of questions: How should we understand the differences we see across the four gospels? What might have inspired these writers to craft this important crucifixion scene differently - particularly when, as is true of the authors of Matthew and Luke, they were using the same sources? The student posits that these differences arise from a difference in audience, historical moment, and rhetorical purpose. She turns to scholarship and finds her interpretation confirmed.

But the bigger questions persist. If the gospels are constructed to serve the earthly purposes of converting or supporting the beliefs of specific audiences, how can they also be considered as true? After doing a great deal of sketching, the student posits that perhaps the differences and contradictions are precisely what communicates the texts' truth to its audience of believers. After all, if the truth of a supreme being is beyond human grasp, then perhaps it requires a many-voiced or polyglossic narrative. With this idea in mind, the student produces a paper that not only details the variances across the texts, but offers a claim about why an audience of believers are not deterred by the differences. It is this claim that serves as the umbrella idea, synthesizing the student's various observations and ideas.

To sum up, successful employment of the umbrella method depends on four steps:

1. Move fluidly back and forth between the text and your abstractions/ generalizations, ready to adjust your ideas to the new evidence and abstractions you encounter.
2. Sketch your ideas. Drawing your ideas helps you pull your thinking out of linear, two-dimensional modes, enabling you to see multiple possibilities for your essays.
3. Seek an umbrella idea, under which your ideas can stand. To get to this umbrella idea, you need not only to analyze but to synthesize: you need to bring disparate ideas together, to see if they fit.
4. Create this synthesis by playing with language, creating an umbrella sentence that can embrace your ideas. This requires that you write and revise your thesis sentence several times as you write your paper.

Will This Thesis Sentence Make the Grade?

In the end, you may have spent a good deal of time writing your thesis and still not know if it's a good one. Here are some questions to ask yourself.

- Does my thesis sentence attempt to answer (or at least to explore) a challenging intellectual question?
- Is the point I'm making one that would generate discussion and argument, or is it one that would leave people asking, "So what?"
- Is my thesis too vague? Too general? Should I focus on some more specific aspect of my topic?

- Does my thesis deal directly with the topic at hand, or is it a declaration of my personal feelings?
- Does my thesis indicate the direction of my argument? Does it suggest a structure for my paper?
- Is the language in my thesis vivid and clear? Have I structured my sentence so that the important information is in the main clause? Have I used subordinate clauses to house less important information? Have I used parallelism to show the relationship between parts of my thesis? In short, is this thesis the very best sentence that it can be?

What else do you need to know about thesis sentences?

A good thesis usually relies on a strong introduction, sharing the work.

As your writing becomes more sophisticated, you will find that a one-sentence thesis statement cannot bear the burden of your entire argument. Therefore, you will find yourself relying increasingly on your introduction to lay the groundwork. Use your introduction to explain some of your argument's points and/or to define its terms. Save the "punch" for your thesis. For more information about creating good introductions that can support your thesis sentences, see [Introductions and Conclusions](#) elsewhere in this website.

The structure of your thesis, along with its introduction, should in some way reflect the logic that brought you to your argument.

It's helpful when structuring your thesis sentence to consider for a moment how it was that you came to your argument in the first place. No matter what discipline you are working in, you came to your idea by way of certain observations. For example, perhaps you have noticed in a History of Education course that female college students around the turn of the century seem very often to write about the idea of service to the community. How did you come to that observation? What did you observe first? And, more importantly, **how did you go about exploring the significance of this observation?** Did you investigate other college documents to see if the value of service was explicitly stated there? Or was this value implied in course descriptions, extra curricular possibilities, and so forth? Reconstruct for yourself how you came to your observations, and use this to help you to create a coherent introduction and thesis.

A good working thesis is your best friend.

Those writers who understand the concept of "working thesis" are way ahead of the game. A "working thesis" is a thesis that works for you, helping you to see where your ideas are going. Many students keep their working thesis in front of them at all times to help them to control the direction of their argument. But what happens when you stumble onto an idea that your thesis isn't prepared for? Or, more important, what happens when you think everything is going well in your paper and suddenly you arrive at a block? Always return to your working thesis, and give it a critical once-over. You may find that the block in your writing process is related to some limitation in your thesis. Or you may find that hidden somewhere in that working thesis is the germ of an even better idea. Stay in conversation with your thesis throughout the writing process. You'll be surprised at what you can learn from it.