

From Topic to Thesis

From Topic/Problem to Arguable Statement to (Working) Thesis

Booth, Wayne C., Gregory G. Colomb, and Joseph M. Williams. *The Craft of Research*. Chicago, IL: U of Chicago P, 2003.

1. Identify a Problem/ Topic

When a topic is left open, many writers put off getting started because it is difficult thinking of or deciding on the topic. Experienced writers say that the best way to choose a topic is literally to let the topic choose you. That is, **the subjects that compel you – that puzzle, intrigue, irritate, or in some way pose a problem for you – are likely to engage your interests and hence evoke your best writing**. Even with assigned topics, by asking yourself what is most problematic about the topic, you can often find some aspect that is particularly compelling. Once you start to *wonder* about a topic, to see it terms of the problems it raises, you are at the point of having something to think – and write – about. You can begin to identify a problem by thinking through the following questions:

- What topics do you wish you knew more about?
- What topics are most likely to get you fired up?
- What about one of these topics is most confusing to you? Most exciting? Most irritating?
- What person or group might this topic raise problems for?
- What issues you care about does this topic connect to?

Example Topics:

1. Violence and religion in C. Smith's short story "Commander Suzdal"
2. Human-Animal Relations in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland*

2. From Topic to Arguable Statement

Checking whether a statement can be argued

An early step in the process of argument to convince or decide is to make a statement about a topic and then check to see that the statement can, in fact, be argued. An arguable statement should **not be a mere fact or opinion** and have three characteristics:

1. It should attempt to convince readers of/ change their minds about something.
2. It should address a problem for which no easily acceptable solution exists or ask a question to which no absolute answer exists.
3. It should present a position that readers might have varying perspectives on.

Exercise

Taking into account these three characteristics, decide which of the following statements is arguable (in a scholarly sense) and which is not:

1. In C. Smith's "Commander Suzdal" issues of religion and violence are linked.
2. In C. Smith's "Commander Suzdal" religion and violence are important topics.
3. In Gilman's novel *Herland* humans' treatment of animals can be read metaphorically.
4. In Gilman's novel *Herland* humans treat animals well.

3. From Arguable Statement to (Working) Thesis

Once you have an **arguable statement**, you need to make a claim about it, one you will then ask readers to accept. Your **claim** turns your arguable statement into a **working thesis**. For example, look at the following statement:

In Gilman's novel *Herland* humans' treatment of animals can be read metaphorically.

This statement is arguable – it aims to convince, it addresses an issue with **no obvious answer**, and it **could be disputed**. Although it does make a kind of claim—that there is second level of meaning to the depiction of humans' treatment of animals in the novel—the claim is just a statement about *what is*. To develop a claim that can become the working thesis or an argument, you usually need to direct your statement toward some action; that is, your claim needs to move from *what is* to *what ought to be believed by your reader*.

Statement plus claim about what ought to be believed by your reader:

Charlotte Perkins Gilman's novel *Herland* uses depictions of human-animal relations to comment on issues of gender and race.

A working thesis should have two parts: a **topic** part, which states or contains the topic, and a **comment** part, which makes an interesting point/argument about the topic.

Example: “Commander Suzdal” questions American narratives of expansion and empire.(T)
by linking issues of violence and religion (C)

Exercise: Determine the ‘topic part’ and ‘comment part’ of the following (working) thesis:

Charlotte Perkins Gilman's utopian novel *Herland* uses depictions of human-animal relations to illustrate early-twentieth-century ideas about gender and race.

Remember: A successful (working) thesis has three characteristics. It should

1. Be potentially *interesting* to your intended audience
2. Be as *specific* as possible
3. Limit the topic enough to make it *manageable*

4. Why Have a Working Thesis at all?

A thesis states the main idea of a piece of writing. Most kinds of academic writing contain a thesis statement, often near the beginning, which functions as a promise to the readers, letting them know what will be discussed. Though you will probably not have a finished thesis when you begin to write, you should **establish a working thesis early on in your writing process**. Even though it will probably change as you write, a working thesis is important because:

1. It **focuses** your thinking, research, and investigation on a particular point about the topic and thus keeps you on track; and
2. It provides **concrete questions** to ask about purpose, audience, and your rhetorical stance (helping you see, for example, how to design a thesis for a particular audience)

Exercise: Come up with a working thesis for one of the primary texts you were asked to review for today's session or for the primary text you have chosen for your paper.