

Formulating a Thesis

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You've probably heard many times that a good essay needs a strong thesis. But what does this really mean? Let's start with a definition. A thesis is

The main idea that is at the center of your work. A thesis should summarize the one thing that a text is attempting to assert or prove. It is often one or two sentences in the introduction of a paper that clearly and concisely tell a reader what the paper is "about" ("Thesis").

In other words, the thesis statement crystallizes your paper's argument. But what makes a thesis "good"? Well, for one, a strong thesis is *arguable*. This means two things. First, it goes beyond merely summarizing or describing to stake out an interpretation or position that's not obvious and that others could challenge for good reasons. Second, a good thesis is arguable in the literal sense that it can be argued, that is, it can be supported through a thoughtful analysis of your key source or sources. If your argument lacks evidence, readers will think your statement is an opinion or belief as opposed to an argument, which always rests on evidence.

Why do I need an arguable thesis?

It helps to back way up and think more broadly about why readers of academic writing value the arguable thesis. What larger purpose does it serve? And why is this function important? Knowing the answers to these questions helps writers understand their readers who bring a set of expectations to texts. The better you can anticipate the expectations of your readers, the better you'll be able to persuade them to consider seeing things your way.

Academic readers (and readers more generally) read to learn something new. They want to see the writer challenge commonplaces, either everyday assumptions about issues in the world or truisms in the scholarly literature. In other words, academic readers want to be surprised so that their thinking shifts or at least becomes more complex by the time they finish reading your essay. Good essays problematize what we think we know and offer an alternative explanation in their place. They engage critically with what we think we understand and leave their reader with a fresh perspective on a problem.

We all bring important past experiences and beliefs to our reading of texts, objects, and problems. You can harness these observational powers to engage critically with what you are studying. The key is to be alert to what strikes you as strange, problematic, paradoxical, or puzzling about your object of study. If you can articulate this and a claim in response, you're well on your way to having a strong arguable thesis.

How do I write an arguable thesis?

It may seem obvious but all good writing has a purpose or motive for existing. The thesis is an argumentative response to this problem. This is why it seldom makes sense to start a writing project by stating the thesis. The first step is to articulate the question or problem your paper addresses.

Readers will be surprised by your argument, and will recognize your thesis as arguable, if you use the introduction to set up a problem, puzzle, or question. Your thesis statement, which appears at the end of the

introduction, is your particular stance on this problem. Articulating a problem or question helps invest your reader in your paper's thesis. It helps your reader see why your thesis is important and what problem or issue it helps us see in a new light.

Here are some possible ways to introduce a conceptual problem in your paper's introduction. Experiment with adapting one to match your assignment and interests.

1. Challenge a commonplace interpretation (and your own first impressions).

- How are readers likely to interpret this source or issue? What might intelligent readers think at first glance? (Or, if you've been given secondary sources or have been asked to conduct research to locate secondary sources, what do other writers or scholars assume is true or important about this primary source or issue?)
- What does this commonplace interpretation leave out, overlook, or under-emphasize?

2. Help your reader see the complexity of your topic.

- Identify and describe for your reader a paradox, puzzle, or contradiction in your primary source(s).
- What larger questions does this paradox or contradiction raise for you and your readers?

3. If your assignment asks you to do research, piggyback off another scholar's research.

- Summarize for your reader another scholar's argument about your topic, primary source, or case study and tell your reader why this claim is interesting.
- Now explain how you will extend this scholar's argument to explore an issue or case study that the scholar doesn't address fully.

4. If your assignment asks you to do research, identify a gap in another scholar's or a group of scholars' research.

- Summarize for your reader another scholar's argument about your topic, primary source, or case study and tell your reader why this claim is interesting. Or, summarize how scholars in the field tend to approach your topic.
- Next, explain what important aspect this scholarly representation misses or distorts. Introduce your particular approach to your topic and its value.

5. If your assignment asks you to do research, bring in a new lens for investigating your case study or problem.

- Summarize for your reader how a scholar or group of scholars has approached your topic.
- Introduce a theoretical source (possibly from another discipline) and explain how it helps you address this issue from a new and productive angle.

Drafting the Thesis

Once you have a sense of your paper's purpose—the particular conceptual problem it addresses—you're ready to craft your thesis in response. A good thesis will be *focused*—that is, it will be focused on your object of study (as opposed to making a big claim about the world).

Here is an example of one way to limit your topic. Try experimenting with this rubric if you need help articulating your thesis:

By examining _____ [topic/approach], we can see _____ [thesis—the claim that's surprising], which readers might otherwise miss. This is important because _____ (Simpson "Five Ways of Looking at a Thesis").

Here are some other ways of getting started:

At first glance it appears that _____ [commonplace interpretation], but when we look more closely at _____ [evidence] we can see _____ [surprising interpretation].

Although _____ [commonplace interpretation], _____ [counterintuitive response].

Notice how all of these sample rubrics invite writers to make statements that challenge easy or obvious interpretations. They present alternative viewpoints that help the reader recognize the thesis as an important intervention.

A quick caveat: there are lots of ways of drafting a thesis statement. Rubrics like the ones above can help you warm up and you can adapt them or discard them when you find the best way to articulate your paper's main claim.

Examples of Arguable Thesis Statements

Below you'll find examples of arguable thesis statements.

A paper that only analyzes a primary source:

"By examining the role of so-called freaks in the film *Sixteen Candles*, **we can see** that the film defines its protagonist as "normal" by setting her apart from characters that are represented as "others," **which is important** because it helps us understand how popular culture is preoccupied with policing the boundaries of normalcy."

Notice that the thesis statement does something unexpected. Instead of focusing on Molly Ringwald's character, the protagonist, the writer chooses to focus on how the film defines her normalcy *in relation to* characters that are minor and represented as outcasts. This is the writer's particular intervention that's interesting, surprising and arguable.

Others could also disagree with it. Someone could argue, for example, that Molly Ringwald's character is herself an outsider—that she's not defining herself against so-called freaks, but is one herself, which makes us empathize with the film's outsiders (as opposed to identifying ourselves against them).

And finally, the writer explains why the thesis is important. The larger issue at stake for this writer is that the film helps us see how popular culture plays a social role in defining for viewers what's normal and what's not. The essay's conclusion will address this larger point, situating the paper's local thesis statement

into a global debate about how popular culture conditions our responses as viewers.

A research paper that engages with multiple sources:

“By **analyzing** *Sixteen Candles* through the lens of Georg Simmel’s writings on fashion, **we can see** that the protagonist’s desire to be fashionable is the expression of her desire to be recognized as an individual and accepted as a member of the group. **This is important because** it helps us see that the film is not merely a superficial teen movie about high school cliques, but rather a deep investigation of the ambivalent yearnings of middle class youth to fashion themselves as both special and normal.

Even though this thesis statement appears in a research paper, the same principle is at work. The writer has opted to say something new by using the sociologist George Simmel’s writings on fashion to explain the protagonist’s desire to distinguish herself by belonging to the popular crowd. Notice how the writer addresses an interesting paradox in the film—between the need to belong and the need to be seen as different and unique. Simmel’s writings help her articulate this claim.

She claims that the thesis is important because it gives us a more complex interpretation of the film and its engagement with class and youth culture.

Testing Your Thesis

You can test your thesis statement’s arguability by asking the following questions:

- **Does my thesis only or mostly summarize my source?** If so, try some of the exercises above to articulate a problem to which your thesis responds.
- **Is my thesis arguable?** Can it be supported by evidence and is it surprising and contentious? If not, return to your sources and practice the exercises above.
- **Is my thesis about my primary source or case study or is it about the world?** If it’s about the world, revise it so that it focuses on your primary source or case study. Remember: you’ll need solid evidence to support your thesis.

Works Cited

“Thesis.” Glossary. *Writing Commons*. University of Southern Florida, n.d. Web. 27 June 2013.

Simpson, Erik. “Five Ways of Looking at a Thesis.” *Connections: A Hypertext Resource for Literature*. Grinnell College, n.d. Web. 27 June 2013.