

# DEVELOPING YOUR THESIS

*Adapted from the Composition Center at Dartmouth College*

## WRITING YOUR THESIS STATEMENT

### ***A good thesis statement will make a claim***

You need to develop an interesting perspective that you can support and defend. This perspective must be more than an observation. "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 statement will inspire (rather than quiet) other points of view. In short, if your thesis is positing something that no one can (or would wish to) argue with, then it's not a very good thesis.

### ***A good thesis statement will control the entire argument***

Your thesis statement determines what you are required to say in a paper. It also determines what you cannot say. Every paragraph in your paper exists in order to support your thesis. Accordingly, if one of your paragraphs seems irrelevant to your thesis you have two choices: get rid of the paragraph, or rewrite your thesis.

Understand that you don't have a third option: you can't simply stick the idea in without preparing the reader for it in your thesis. The thesis is like a contract between you and your reader. If you introduce ideas that the reader isn't prepared for, you've violated that contract.

### ***A good thesis will provide a structure for your argument***

A good thesis not only signals to the reader *what* your argument is, but *how* your argument will be presented. In other words, your thesis statement should either directly or indirectly suggest the structure of your argument to your reader.

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

## ALTERNATIVES TO THE THESIS STATEMENT

### ***The thesis question***

Not every piece of writing sets out to make a claim. If your purpose as a writer is to explore, for instance, the reasons for the 9/11 attacks (a topic for which you are not prepared to make a claim), your thesis might read: "What forces conspired to bring these men to crash four jetliners into American soil?" You'll note that this question, while provocative, does not offer a sense of the argument's structure. It permits the writer to pursue all ideas, without committing to any. While this freedom might seem appealing, in fact you will find that the lack of a declarative thesis statement requires *more* work: you need to tighten your internal structure and your transitions from paragraph to paragraph so that the essay is clear and the reader can easily follow your line of inquiry.

### ***The implied thesis***

One of the most fascinating things about a thesis sentence is that it is the most important sentence in a paper - even when it's not there.

In some essays, you'll find it difficult to point to a single sentence that declares the argument. Still, the essay is coherent and makes a point. In these cases, the writers have used an implied thesis.

Writers use an implied thesis when they want the reader to come to his or her own conclusions about the matter at hand. Good writers will have their thesis clearly stated - either in their own minds, or in their notes for the paper. They may elect not to put the thesis in the paper, but every paragraph, every sentence that they write is controlled by the thesis all the same.

If you decide to write a paper with an implied thesis, be sure that you have a strong grasp of your argument and its structure. Also be sure that you supply adequate transitions, so that the reader can follow your argument with ease.

### **IS MY THESIS STATEMENT AN EFFECTIVE ONE?**

Here are some questions to ask yourself:

- Does my thesis statement 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?
- Does my introductory paragraph define terms important to my thesis? If I am writing a research paper, does my introduction "place" my thesis within the larger, ongoing scholarly discussion about my topic?
- 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 that it can be?

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

Use your introduction to explain some of your argument's points and/or to define its terms. Save the "punch" for your thesis.

### ***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 statement 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. 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 thesis sentence 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.

### **CONSTRUCTING THE THESIS: A WRITER'S CLINIC FOR BEGINNERS**

Constructing a good thesis statement is no easy matter. In creating a thesis, the writer struggles with her own confusion. She seeks to create some order out of the morass of observations she has about a text. If you are willing to endure a little confusion, we'll show you here how it is that a thesis statement is constructed. As the thesis will pass through several incarnations before it reaches its final form, we advise you to read this section completely from beginning to end.

When structuring your thesis statement, it's helpful to start by considering how it was that you came to your argument in the first place. You arrived at your point of view by way of certain observations and a particular logic. You will expect your reader to arrive at the same conclusion, via the same observations and logic that you yourself used.

Put yourself in the place of the reader. What does this thesis statement tell you about the structure of the argument to come?

Look closely at your thesis and ask yourself this hard question: Does my thesis give my reader a sense of the real argument to come? Does it help you to see the overall structure of your argument? In other words, a good **working thesis statement** provides the reader with a "map" of your essay.

### **WHAT IS A "WORKING THESIS"?**

A thesis statement, as we've said, is a kind of contract between you and your reader. It asserts, controls, and structures your argument for your reader's ease. A working thesis statement, on the other hand, is a sentence (or two) that you compose in order to make the work of writing easier. It's a statement that asserts, controls, and structures the argument for you.

The working thesis need not be eloquent. In fact, it can be quite clunky, declaring your argument and then clumsily listing your supporting points. Not to worry: you'll be revising your thesis, and often more than once.

Remember that, as you write, you are bound to come up with new ideas and observations that you'd like to incorporate into your paper. Every time you make a new discovery, your thesis statement will have to be revised. Sometimes you'll find that you're stuck in your writing. You may need to return to your thesis.

Revising your working thesis at this juncture could help you to clarify for yourself the direction of your argument. Don't be afraid to revise! In fact, the most important quality of a working thesis statement is its flexibility. A working thesis needs to keep up with your thinking. It needs to accommodate what you learn as you go along.