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How Can I Create a Strong Thesis

Overview

For most college essays, you need a thesis statement that captures the argument, or central claim, of the essay. It will usually appear at the end of the first or second paragraph of the essay and will include the basic argument and its implications. Your thesis will often change from early thinking (to accommodate your evolution in thinking as you write) once you've got a whole draft, and a strong working thesis will adapt into a well-considered, well-supported articulation of your ultimate argument. The takeaway? Creating a strong thesis goes hand-in-hand with creating a strong argument in the overall essay.

General Considerations

A strong thesis should do the following things:

1. Go beyond announcing a subject – join an ongoing conversation by taking a stand on an issue or offering an interpretation of something (a text, a policy, a new scientific discovery, etc.)
2. Get specific – rule out most of the broad material pertinent to your topic and zero in on a clear claim that focuses more narrowly on some specific aspect of your topic.
3. Indicate the "what, why, and how" of your argument – *what* are you claiming, *why* you believe this to be true, important, etc., and *how* you will approach your topic.

A strong thesis will apply to your issue/text and only to your issue/text

Thesis statements that are too broad often could be transplanted from one paper (even one subject!) to the next without anyone noticing. If what you claim in your thesis could work equally well for an essay on *Mrs. Dalloway* and an essay on the virtues of capitalism, you have more focusing and tightening to do.

In Practice

Start With a Working Thesis (Revise it Later)
A working thesis is often different from a final thesis. A working thesis will help you get started writing by keeping you focused on the general sense of what you wish to argue, even if you don't have all the details in place; those details will usually work themselves out in the writing. Often after you've finished writing a complete draft, you will realize that you've actually argued something more interesting and complex than your working thesis could express. At that point, you should revise your working thesis into a final thesis that accurately expresses your argument.

The first step toward writing a strong thesis is taking a stand or offering an interpretation of an issue related to your topic. Sometimes an essay assignment might ask you a question that will prompt an argument, and other times you will need to come up with an argument on your own. Either way, your position can be simple at first, as the process of writing the essay will most likely lead you to develop a more complex thesis. The following are samples of possible working theses:

- American politics relies too heavily on the two-party system.
- Jane Eyre does not align with feminism.
- The potential use of stem cell research should be explored.
- The continuous stream of news coverage undermines the quality of the news.

In each of these statements, the writer has taken a position that will allow them to start writing, even though these statements could be seen as too simple to truly make a strong thesis. These statements could be referred to as the ***basic argument*** (the "what")***.*** A strong thesis will also require justifications (the "why," sometimes referred to as ***implications***) and/or a ***method/framework*** (the "how"), which can be explored later once the basic argument is in place.

Look for Signs that Your Thesis is Weak

On occasion, writers will be hindered early on by statements that seem like they will make a good basis for arguments, while in actuality they prevent an argument from being strong. For that reason, it's good to know what separates a strong thesis from a weak one.

A strong thesis is NOT:

- **just an observation** (Example: Jane Eyre relates to ideas about feminism.) This may be true, but this statement is simply an observation about the book—it doesn't take a stand on how feminism is treated in the text.
- **a statement of fact** (Example: Many people are opposed to stem cell research.) Fact-based statements can be easily checked by asking yourself if anyone could reasonably disagree with you. If everyone would agree that your statement is true, then your statement is only a fact, not an argument.
- **a broad generalization** (Example: Politics are working for the people.) It may seem as if using broad terms allows for more possibilities for things to include in your essay, but broad issues because contain too many specific arguments within them, and making a broad claim will mean making a shallow argument. In this example, "politics" and "people" are both too broad. The "American two-party system" is a more specific category that will allow you to focus on one argument and discuss the complexities within it.
- **a list of examples** (Example: The continuous stream of news coverage causes lack of depth, focuses on superficial issues, and results in information overload.) While your essay may include examples of all of these issues, using a list for a thesis doesn't allow for deep investigation of one topic nor does it show the relationship between ideas. The items in the list may be points of evidence you can use in your essay without naming them.

Make It Complex

A strong thesis needs to make a complex argument, meaning it needs to show that the ***complications*** or ***contradictions*** of the issue have been taken into account in the essay and that the *argument matters*—or that there are ***implications*** to the argument. The complexity of the argument, and therefore the thesis, can be explored in various ways that can help evolve the working thesis into a complex thesis.

Explore counterarguments

What reasonable claims have others made that contradict your argument, and how might taking those into consideration help you justify or strengthen your own? If you were to launch your own rebuttal to your argument, what would that look like? How does that help you complicate your ideas?

Consider a variety of angles

There are more than two sides—often far more—to any argument. For instance, people might argue the same thing for different reasons, might agree on a common problem but feel differently about how to solve it, might see the same problem as being caused by different things, etc. If you seek out as many stances on your topic as possible, you might be able to shape your argument in a way that fills a void in the conversation.

Ask yourself why the argument matters

Ok, you may be writing about the Two-Thirds Compromise because your instructor told you to. But beyond that, find a way to consider why you (and we) should care about it. What is important about your topic (whether historical or contemporary, out of the STEM fields or music and dance) here and now? Who are the stakeholders in your argument? Is there anyone whose voice hasn't been heard on this that you could bring to light? In other words, "so what?" If you can find a legitimate reason why the argument matters, you can argue it from a stronger, more complicated place.

Consider starting with the "magical thesis" template, at least as a working thesis.

"By looking at _____, we can see _____, which most [readers, scientists, politicians, actors, etc.] don't see; this is important because _____." This thesis template asks you to articulate your object of study, what you can reveal about it, and why your revelation is important.

Exercise

Think about the project you're working on, and answer the following questions:

- What is your topic?
- What is your stance on the topic? *State this as a complete sentence.*
- Why do you believe this? *State your reasons in a "because" clause.*
- Why would someone disagree with this? *State the opposing opinion in an "although" clause.*

Now put it together to form a working thesis: "Although" clause + Stance on topic + "Because" clause = Complete (working) thesis statement