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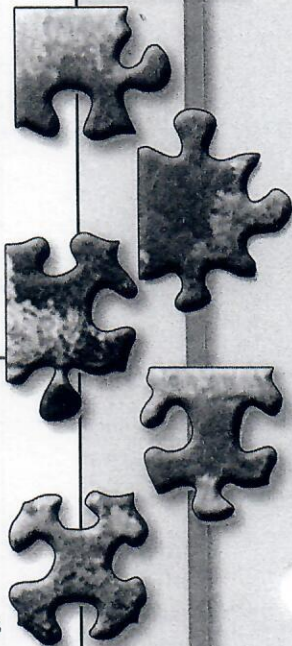
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CHAPTER 3

Finding and Supporting a Thesis



To be sure that you have the kind of central idea that will lead to an interesting and unified paper, you must state a thesis, and you must consider how to present appropriate and logical support for it.

A **thesis** is the position a writer takes on an arguable point—one on which more than one opinion is possible. It is the main idea the paper will support. The writer must convince the reader that this position or idea is valid.

Remember that your topic is not your thesis. Instead, your thesis is what you have to say about your topic. It is an opinion about, or an attitude toward, the topic, which you will attempt to support in your essay. It is a one-sentence summary of the idea the writer will defend. Here are two examples:

In this chapter you will

- identify the elements of a good thesis
- develop a thesis for your own papers
- evaluate strong and weak thesis statements
- use supporting details to back up a thesis
- analyze student writings for their use of details to support a thesis
- analyze professional writings for their use of details to support a thesis

Topic	Thesis
Graduation requirements	Technical programs should require students to take some courses in the humanities.
Registration	A few simple changes would improve the registration procedure on our campus.

With few exceptions, the papers your instructors will ask you to write in college will benefit enormously from a thesis. A professor of American literature, for example, won't ask you to summarize *Huckleberry Finn*. She wants to know what conclusions you reached after reading the novel: *Mark Twain's Huckleberry Finn is an indictment of slavery, let's say; or Mark Twain, in Huckleberry Finn, criticizes the violence of the pre-Civil War South.* Until you can

make that kind of statement, you aren't ready to write effectively because you don't have clearly in mind the point you will make. And if you aren't certain of what your idea is, you stand little chance of convincing a reader of its validity. It's important, therefore, to spend time thinking your idea through before you start writing. This will save time and grief in the long run.

Identifying the Elements of a Good Thesis

There are several characteristics of a good thesis. When you are writing, you can use these tips to evaluate your thesis statements.



TIPS for Evaluating a Thesis

- **You usually can state a good thesis in one complete sentence.** Even though you may find that you want to devote a paragraph or more to presenting the idea of your paper, until you can state your main idea in one sentence, you may not have it under control.
- **A good thesis almost always appears in the first (or sometimes second) paragraph of a college essay.** Like all good "rules," there are exceptions, and the recommendation that you write your thesis in the first paragraph of your essay is not carved in stone. Some writers won't state a thesis directly, expecting the reader to infer it. Some writers like to build slowly to a thesis and will take more than a couple of paragraphs to get to their main point. But for your own success in writing the many papers you'll have to produce in college, it's a very good idea to state your thesis in a single sentence in the first paragraph. Aim to build an introductory paragraph whose final sentence is your thesis statement.
- **A good thesis gives an opinion or attitude about the facts.** To say that Brutus stabbed Shakespeare's Julius Caesar on the Ides of March is to state a fact. A thesis, a statement *about* the fact, might read, *Brutus succeeded in killing Caesar on the Ides of March because Caesar had grown too arrogant and proud to protect himself.*
- **A good thesis avoids stating the obvious.** If you're writing about the dangers of driving while texting, which of these sentences serves as the better thesis, do you think?
 1. People who text and drive are dangerous.
 2. People who text and drive should have their licenses revoked after the first offense.

Sentence 2 makes the better thesis. It states a topic and offers an opinion about it—and a challengeable one at that. You could argue that sentence

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1 states topic and opinion—except that the point is so obvious that a reader could easily turn away in frustration. Sure, people who text and drive are dangerous, and (although many violators exist, to be sure) everyone knows this as a fact. Your thesis always should avoid stating the obvious.

- **A good thesis is limited.** The idea stated must be one that can be clearly explained, supported, and illustrated in the space called for. A long magazine article might have this as its thesis:

Although, as a result of a controversial and aggressive promotional campaign, women professional golfers now make more money and receive greater recognition than they did ten years ago, they still do not make as much money, receive as much media coverage, or command as much respect as men professional golfers.

But this won't do for a two- or three-page paper; the writer could not develop the thesis fully in so short a space. A better thesis for a short paper might read, *The promotional campaign for the Women's Professional Golf Association has attracted money and attention for professional female golfers.* An even better thesis would be, *The promotional campaign for the Women's Professional Golf Association will offend members and fans who oppose commercialism in women's athletics.*

- **A good thesis is appropriately focused.** Consider this thesis: *The reports in Huffington Post are entertaining and informative, but Huffington Post slants its reports to suit its political bias, and the vocabulary used by Huffington Post requires constant trips to the dictionary.* This thesis says three things about *Huffington Post*: the magazine's reports are entertaining and informative; the reports are slanted; the vocabulary of *Huffington Post* requires constant use of the dictionary. A writer who begins with such a thesis runs the risk of writing a three-part paper that has no central focus. The point of emphasis is not clear. To emphasize that the magazine's reports are entertaining and informative, the writer must subordinate the other points to that idea:

Although the vocabulary used in *Huffington Post* requires constant trips to the dictionary and the reports are often slanted to suit a political bias, the reports are entertaining and informative.

To emphasize the shortcomings of the magazine, the writer should subordinate the entertaining and informative nature of the reports:

Although the reports in *Huffington Post* are entertaining and informative, their vocabulary makes them hard to read, and the material is often slanted to suit a political bias.

- **A good thesis is precise.** It lets the reader and the writer know exactly what the paper will contain. Words such as *good*, *interesting*, *impressive*,

and *many* are too vague to do the job. They say nothing about the subject: What is interesting or good to one person may appear dull or offensive to another. Don't say, "Agatha Christie's detective stories are good." Say, instead, "Agatha Christie's detective stories appeal to those who enjoy solving puzzles." Don't say, "My history class is interesting." Say, "My professor makes history easy to understand."

Developing Your Thesis

Rules for a good thesis are one thing; applying them is another. These tips will help you arrive at that perfectly stated thesis.



TIPS for Developing a Thesis

- **Answer a question.** Sometimes, especially in essay examinations, the thesis statement is suggested by the question. Often, all you have to do is think of a one-sentence answer to the question, and you have your thesis statement.

Example question:

What is job enrichment? Is job enrichment an attempt by management to exploit workers?

Sample thesis statement:

Job enrichment, an effort to motivate workers by making their jobs more attractive, is an attempt by management to exploit laborers by inspiring them to work harder.

In this thesis statement, the writer has both defined *job enrichment* and stated an opinion about the practice. The rest of the essay will give the reasons job enrichment, in this writer's opinion, is an attempt to exploit laborers.

- **Think about your subject.** Frequently, you have to work with a large-scale subject. As you know, it is up to you to limit the subject and decide what point you want to make about it (see Chapter 2). On some subjects—subsidizing college athletics, for example—you may already have a strong opinion. If you have information to back up that opinion, you have no problem. Just state your opinion and then begin thinking about how you can back it up. On other subjects, though, you may at first think you have no opinion. Yet you might, for example, remember from history class that Japan in years past outdistanced the United States in the production of everything from television sets to automobiles. Go to the library and the Internet and read up

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on the subject. You may then form the opinion that one reason Japan became a major industrial power is that the economy had not, since the end of World War II, had to support a military machine. Now you have a thesis.

■ **Review your prewriting activities.** A valuable way to produce a thesis is to review your prewriting activities—free association, brainstorming, lists, and subject maps (see Chapter 2)—with an eye toward a central issue that may be brewing somewhere in your early, unedited thinking on a topic. Suppose that you’re considering a paper on the subject of children’s toys. It’s near holiday time, you’re a parent, and you’ve been giving lots of thought to toys lately. You’ve used free association to jot down anything that comes to mind on the topic. Your list might look like this:

Topic: Toys

1. Expense of toys
2. Shoddy construction: plastic parts don't fit together
3. Focus on violence: guns, destructive images
4. Too many batteries required
5. Sexist toys
6. Difficulty in putting together the parts of toys
7. Unclear, misleading assembly instructions

Considering your list, you note that three items (6, 7, and part of 2) relate to your frustrations with toy assembly. Putting together that kiddie gym really irritated you, didn't it? The more you think about that experience and others like it, the more you realize that item 7 on your list is the heart of the matter. The reason assembling toys is so difficult is that the instructions are unclear and misleading. There's your thesis: *Instructions accompanying disassembled toys are misleading.*

Here is the important message: *You must have a thesis clearly in mind as you plan the rest of the paper.*

Notice that the thesis is different from the topic. A topic is simply the subject of your paper, whereas a thesis makes an assertion about the subject. For the topic *toys*, you saw how the writer developed the thesis. Having a topic in mind helps you produce a thesis. However, merely placing a title at the top of your page to reflect your topic does not mean you have provided a thesis.

Evaluating Thesis Statements: Strong or Weak?

The various topics listed stimulated the thesis statements in the table below. In each case the weak thesis lacks focus and direction and is usually too broad. The successful theses all provide a strong main idea for the writer to pursue in an essay requirement.

Topic	Weak Thesis	Strong Thesis	Explanation
Teenage drinking	A. Teenage drinking is a serious problem.	B. Local colleges have developed successful programs that help college freshmen learn to drink responsibly.	A is too broad; who would disagree? The point is too obvious as stated. B prods the reader's interest: a college-supported program for responsible teenage drinking? Really?
Beauty	A. Different people have different views on the meaning of beauty.	B. Beauty is not physical, internal, or structural. The most accurate definition of beauty is giving encouragement when a person is in deep trouble.	Again, A is unchallengeable; why should a reader continue reading what she already knows is true? B, on the other hand, takes an unconventional view of beauty, and readers will want to know why the writer chooses this word to connect to encouragement.
College costs	A. College costs are rising all over the country and straining family budgets.	B. Tuition costs may be fixed, but attentive college students can help strapped families cut other costs in at least six ways.	The reader of thesis B will read on to learn what these cost-cutting steps will be. Thesis A states the obvious and is much too broad to serve in an essay for class. All over the country? Too much!
Describe a place you know	A. The school cafeteria is an interesting place.	B. At lunch time in the school cafeteria the noise and nonstop activity are enough to give anyone a headache.	"Interesting" is not interesting for a reader. In B, the writer's focus—noise and action—is clear, and his opinion about it is provocative enough to entice readers to continue reading.
Compare the roles of women and men in a society	A. Men and women had different roles and responsibilities in nineteenth-century Western society in the United States.	B. Despite obvious differences in their general roles and responsibilities, when it comes to family relations and dealing with children, men and women in urban Chinese families have remarkably similar roles.	A tries to narrow the topic (nineteenth-century Western society in the United States), but the rest of the thesis statement is too obvious. B turns the obvious on its head—similar responsibilities in Chinese families?—and wins the reader's attention. B admits the obvious but will not deal with it in the essay.

EXERCISE

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Look at the thesis sentences below. What is the topic of each? What is the writer's main point—what does the writer want to say about the topic? How do you think each writer will go about supporting the thesis?

1. The costs of prescription drugs have skyrocketed, which creates problems for consumers of all ages.
2. People use the label *terrorist* indiscriminately and therefore make unfair judgments based on race, color, or religion.
3. Some parents will do, say, or pay anything to get their children into the "right" nursery school.
4. Innovation in American automobile manufacturers has finally challenged advances by foreign competitors.
5. Through a variety of creative programs and police vigilance, it is possible to cut down dramatically on drunk driving among teens.

EXERCISE

Consider the topics indicated below and for each write a thesis that the writer could develop successfully into an essay.

1. Steps to take in improving vocabulary
2. Adding years to a person's life through proper exercise and nutrition
3. The pleasures and pains of rearing a child
4. The value of work-study programs in high school
5. Why texting has become a central activity in teenage life

EXERCISE

Look at the topics in the exercise on page 36 in Chapter 2. What thesis could you develop about each of them?

EXERCISE

Determine which of the following items are thesis statements and which are not. Also determine which thesis statements are too general or too lacking in unity to make a good paper. How does each statement meet the specifications for a thesis, as explained earlier in this chapter? Revise the unacceptable thesis statements accordingly.

1. In a weak economy, employers do not hire quality workers.
2. Teenage drivers are a menace!
3. Americans are saving less and less money each year.
4. Curtailing drug use begins with education.
5. Readers now can download from their home computers many complete texts, including short stories, novels, and works of nonfiction.

EXERCISE

Return to the exercise on page 34 in Chapter 2. For any five topics you limited there, develop thesis statements that could be used successfully in a paper.