



THE WRITING PROCESS

Developing a Thesis Statement

UNDERSTANDING A THESIS

A thesis is a substantial generalization that can stand by itself as the basis of an essay's development. It is an assertion of what the writer believes is right or wrong and why, and it is a statement that can be either true or false.

A thesis clearly and concisely conveys the writer's main argument in an essay, and it allows readers to clearly grasp the focus of the essay, which will be developed in the body of the essay.

A thesis needs to be unified—expressing one main idea—although it can, and often does, include secondary concepts as they relate to the main idea. The thesis statement should be broad enough and arguable enough to be worth defending in an essay.

A thesis statement usually evolves only after considerable reading, writing, and thinking has been done on your topic. You can begin the writing process of an essay with a **preliminary or open thesis**, move on to a **tentative thesis or hypothesis**, and finally arrive at your **closed or final thesis**. During your writing, you will become more secure in advancing your final thesis, which includes the fundamental reason(s) you have chosen to support your assertion.

STAGES OF THE THESIS STATEMENT

Stage I: Preliminary or Open Thesis

In the very early stages of your writing or research, or before you have begun to write, it is advantageous to formulate a **preliminary or open thesis**, which will state your general unifying idea but will not yet reflect how you intend to support that idea. Let's say you are writing an essay on the relationship between the United States criminal court system and the media. You have read one article related to this topic, but you have not yet begun your research. Still, it is possible for you to arrive at a very basic and general opinion without going into detail, secondary topics, or supporting reason(s) for your assertion.

Broad Topic: The United States criminal court system and the media

Example of a Preliminary or Open Thesis: The media plays a very influential role in criminal court trials, perhaps too influential.

To assist you in formulating your preliminary or open thesis, ask basic “W” questions that are related to your topic: who, what, when, where, and why? This will help you determine your particular interests and a possible starting point for your essay or research.

Based on the topic above, the following list demonstrates the different kinds of questions that can be generated. Note how the order of questions goes from the more general to the more specific. It may be easier for you to begin with broader questions as they may lead you to more narrowed and focused questions.

General

- Why is the media involved in court cases?
- When did the media start reporting court cases?
- What is the media's role in criminal court cases?

Specific

- What aspect of the media am I going to write about?
- What kind of criminal case is it?
- When did the case take place?
- Where did the case take place?
- Who were the people involved in the case?

If you are writing a research paper and you have come up with a long list of random questions, select three or four questions that hold the most interest for you. These questions will narrow your focus and help you to plan your research strategy.

Exercise A: Choose a topic, brainstorm for a few minutes, and come up with a basic list of questions. Then, write a preliminary or open thesis.

Stage II: Tentative Thesis or Hypothesis

A tentative thesis or hypothesis is more specific than the preliminary or open thesis, and it is particularly important for a research paper. After you have brainstormed, written a list of questions, arrived at an open thesis, and begun your research and reading, you will be prepared to write a focused question and then a tentative answer to this question. The tentative answer is your hypothesis because it represents what you predict you will be able to conclude.

Example of a Focused Question: Does media publicity in a criminal trial influence the verdict?

Example of a Tentative Thesis or Hypothesis as an Answer to a Focused Question:
The media's ubiquitous presence in courtroom trials has made it impossible to have a jury that is unbiased.

Exercise B: Continuing with your preliminary or open thesis from Exercise A, formulate a focused question and then answer that question with your tentative thesis or hypothesis.

Stage III: Closed or Final Thesis

If you make an assertion and include the reason or reasons which support your assertion, and it is broad enough in scope, yet specific enough to be unified and to serve as a substantial generalization of your essay, you have written a **closed or final thesis** statement. The evidence can take many forms: facts, opinions, anecdotes, statistics, analogies, etc., but the essential relationship between the thesis and the major points of support is one of conclusion to reason:

I believe this (**thesis statement**) to be true because... (**provide the reasons to support your thesis**).

Remember: A thesis statement consists of at least one complete sentence; you cannot use a phrase or sentence fragment. Usually, the first sentence indicates the general thesis assertion, and additional sentences indicate the major support for this assertion. (An assertion is any statement that can be either true or false.) As readers, we may not know whether it is true or false or even have any way of determining whether it is true or false, but the logical response to an assertion is either, “Yes, I believe that to be true” or “No, I do not believe that to be true.” Some sentences do not make assertions. Commands, exclamations, intentions, obvious facts, and questions are considered sentences, but they do not make direct assertions and cannot be used as thesis statements.

Whether or not your thesis is preliminary or open, tentative, or closed and final, it should be considered flexible while you are still writing and doing research. Good writing results from a mixture of conviction and open-mindedness, no matter how diametrical these two qualities appear to be.

The following paragraph represents the introduction to an essay on the subject of “mail order companies” that discusses “deceptive sales techniques” referred to by the author as a form of “psychological harassment.” The closed or final thesis is highlighted in bold.

Mail order companies use deceptive sales techniques to lure potential buyers into purchasing their products. They mail documents that boldly declare: “You have just won 10,000,000” while a half page down in faint, minuscule print it reads: “...if you send in your form and order and you have the matching numbers.” **This type of advertising and solicitation constitutes psychological harassment; it misleads consumers through a fallacious belief that if they buy, they will win, and it should be made illegal.**

GUIDELINES FOR THESIS DEVELOPMENT

Thesis for a Single Source Essay

Many times you will be asked to respond in writing to a single text. Before you begin writing, you must be clear about the author’s intentions and what her/his own thesis is. A good way to do this is to make annotations while you are reading and after you are finished reading to briefly summarize the author’s main points. Also, make sure to separate your own ideas and opinions from those of your source. It would also be beneficial to decide whether you agree or disagree with what the author is saying. Then, you can begin the stages—as listed in this handout—of developing your thesis.

Thesis for a Comparative Essay

In a comparative essay, you will be required to formulate a thesis that encompasses two or more features that you will be comparing and analyzing. Therefore, you will be writing a thesis that looks at multiple perspectives, not necessarily leaning one way or the other, but bringing out a central comparative idea between or among the things, issues, authors, etc., that you choose as the focus of your essay. The following paragraph represents the introduction to an essay comparing the female protagonists from two works of fiction: Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* and Charlotte Perkins Gillman's *The Yellow Wallpaper*. The closed or final thesis is highlighted in bold.

In Kate Chopin's book *The Awakening* and Charlotte Perkins Gillman's novella *The Yellow Wallpaper*, the female protagonists veer from the collective mainstream of a patriarchal society because of their pronounced feelings of alienation, frustration, and emotional and creative repression within this social structure, marked by the subordination of women. Ultimately, both characters escape the narrow restraints of this early 20th century mentality either by suicide—as in *The Awakening*—or through insanity—as in *The Yellow Wallpaper*. **However tragic this may appear on the surface, the implication of deliverance from their restricted environments is one of liberation and transgression from and of the dominant culture. In this way, the women's actions are equally heroic.**

Thesis for a Multiple Source Essay

Most of the guidelines of this handout specifically relate to writing a thesis for a multiple source essay. Remember, it is best to keep your thesis open while you are doing your research, and it is necessary to have a few possible narrow topics in mind before beginning intensive reading. Also, the questions that you formulate in the first stage of the thesis are important, as they will guide you in your research.

Thesis for a Biographical or Historical Research Paper

Biographical and historical topics have an immediate advantage: they can be defined and limited by space and time. Always try to select a specific point in time as the focus of your essay. As you narrow your topic and begin your reading, watch for your emerging thesis: **a single clear impression of the person or event should be the controlling idea of your essay.** Whether you are writing about a sequence of events, as in a battle, or a single event or issue affecting the life of a well-known person, you will still need both a thesis and a strategy to shape the direction of your essay.

Example [biographical profile]: Virginia Woolf

Focus: Woolf's education

Focused Question: In what ways did Woolf receive her education?

Tentative Thesis or Answer to a Focused Question: Virginia Woolf did not receive her academic education from a university because women were, in that provincial Victorian era, not deemed worthy of entering those so-called esteemed halls of academia. In lieu of any formal training, Woolf substantially and extraordinarily educated herself although it is true that her home environment was an academic one and she was given guidance from her father, Leslie Stephen, as well as other relatives.