Developing a Thesis

Understanding and Communicating Your Topic Sentence

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Developing a Thesis

• What is a “thesis”?

“Thesis: thē-səs, noun 2 a: a position or proposition that a person (as a candidate for scholastic honors) advances and offers to maintain by argument

b: a proposition to be proved or one advanced without proof: hypothesis” (Merriam-Webster’s online).
What is a “Thesis”? 

Your thesis is more than a main idea, and it is more than an outline or overview of your paper.

It should be an answer to a valid research question.

Here are some steps to help you discover your valid research question:
Choosing a Topic

In most cases, a broad subject area will be introduced to you by your instructor or from the class material you are studying.

1. Discover an interest within this subject area. An interest is an area of inquiry to explore further.

For example, the broad subject would be American history and an interest from this would be The Civil War.
Discovering an Interest

Sometimes it is difficult to discover an interest. Try finishing the following sentences.

• I am curious about...
• I am confused about...
• Recently I have been thinking a lot about...
Narrowing the Interest

• After choosing an interest, you must narrow it to a plausible topic.

For instance, you may have an interest in the Civil War, but that topic is too broad to write even a forty page paper. Several techniques can help you narrow a topic to a scholarly article or conference paper length. These techniques are often called pre-writing or brainstorming techniques.
Pre-writing Techniques

• **Clustering:**

  Civil War

  - Causes
    - Slavery
  - Atlanta
  - Gettysburg
  - Main Events
  - Outcomes
    - Emancipation
    - Poverty
  - People of Interest
    - Pres
    - Generals

What else caused the War? Was slavery really the main issue?
Pre-writing Techniques

• **Burke’s Pentad:** Great when examining human actions:

1. **Act:** What was done?
2. **Scene:** When or where was it done?
3. **Agent:** Who did it?
4. **Agency:** How did he/she do it? What means or instruments were used?
5. **Purpose:** Why did he/she do it?
Pre-writing Techniques

- **Free writing**: Allow yourself to write or type for ten minutes—don’t stop, don’t worry about typos, and just write everything that comes to mind:

The civil war was not just about slavery, there was social and economic factors and their were also powerful people trying to change the world and stubborn people everyone wanted to be in charge and no one wanted the responsibility for change, slaves were moving on and running away and people were beginning to question things. There is also the aspect of foreign relations and what other countries like England thought of all of this. It is like small branches piling up to make a giant bonfire and abolition was the match that lit it all in flames…I don’t know what else to write.. I guess that maybe I could research some of the political leaders to find out more and maybe look at what was happening in the area with economics and other social issues….I don’t know what else to write now but I bet there is someone in the library who specializes in this area and I can go find the reference librarian that will lead to to to some new ideas and maybe find some support for my ideas…….
Pre-writing Techniques

• **Rapid Sketches**: Make lists of things that you have noticed, seen recently, or been thinking about that may help you narrow your topic:

  Nothing big and political happens for just one reason
  There are always things hidden beneath the surface
  The American public is (historically) satisfied with the simplified answers
  Slavery could have been abolished without war
  People in power often struggle with ego
  Absolute power corrupts...
  What about religion?
  Better ways to reach the same ends...
Pre-writing Techniques

• **Conversation**: Try discussing your ideas with someone else. If your roommate is not in the mood, visit The Write Site!

Me: What do you think caused the Civil War?
You: Slavery, duh!
Me: Yeah, but doesn’t that seem really simplified? I mean, no war ever started for just one reason.
You: I do remember learning something about government control, excessive taxes, and a lot of pretty extreme pamphlet printing.
Me: Really? That sounds interesting. I wonder what the political views of the pamphlet writers were.
You: Yeah, kinda like wondering what views the media is pushing on us.
Me: Right. Thanks! I’m going to the TWU Library now.
Pre-writing Techniques

• Try **Doodling** or **Sketching**: Just scribble some ideas or even check your class notes to see what you doodled about in your margins.

What caused the fire?

Can people ever possibly regenerate limbs like starfish?

How does excess belly-fat effect people with diabetes?
Pre-writing Techniques

• **Twenty Questions:** Ask yourself as many questions as you can think of about your topic (here the topic is “X”)

1. How is x different from your personal experience?
2. What does x mean?
3. How is x made or done?
4. X used to be____but now is_____.
5. Where does x occur or appear?
6. What is the primary function of x?
7. Why does x occur?
8. What does x cause or influence?
9. What are the consequences of x?
10. What are the types of x?

11. How does x compare with y?
12. How is x different from your vicarious experiences?
13. How is x different from what you expected?
14. What is the present status of x?
15. What kind of person is x?
16. What is the value of x?
17. When does x occur?
18. What happens just before/after x?
19. What is likely to be true of x in the future?
20. What case can be made for/against x?
Significance to Audience

- At first the topic may interest the researcher alone, but at some point, the researcher has to decide whether the question and its answer might be significant to others.
Determine the Value

To determine the value/significance of your topic, approach it from different perspectives. Ask these questions to see the importance of your topic from different points of view.

- What do you want to know about this topic?
- What might interest others about this topic?
- Ask the standard who, what, when, and where questions.
- Trace the history and changes of your topic.
Define a Rationale

Answer the “so what” question. Use the following steps to begin to find the significance of your project:

Name your topic: “I am writing about__________”

Suggest a question: “Because__________________________”

Motivate the question: “In order to understand how, why, or whether__________________________”
Create a Researchable Question

After you feel you have a narrow and significant topic or hypothesis, use your topic to create a researchable question:

• Would the Civil War still have occurred had slavery not been an issue?
• How reliable are eyewitness identifications in courtrooms?
• Do dress codes in high schools positively effect student learning outcomes?
Researchable Question

- Ask yourself: “When people argue about this topic, what do they disagree over?” Choose one issue they argue about and make it your topic. Phrase it as a question to be answered. This is called “problematizing” your topic.

- Seek out cognitive dissonance: disagreement or contradiction among various sources. This disagreement becomes the basis for framing the researchable question, and your paper is to provide an answer for it (or at least an analysis for why it exists). This answer will be your thesis.
Forming Your Thesis

Researchers use information to answer a question that their topic inspired them to ask, to formulate a claim (their position on an issue) with reason. So, once you have your question and have done some preliminary research to discover your answer or analysis of your question, it is time to create your thesis.

• “The Civil War would still have occurred had slavery not been an issue because other political, economic, and social issues had been combining to create a distinct schism between the confederate and the union sympathizers.”
Forming Your Thesis

Be careful not to just re-state your question. You need to add details that give your audience some idea of your argument.

• “Eyewitness identifications in courtrooms are not reliable.”

The thesis should offer more specific information like:

• “Eyewitness identifications in courtrooms are not reliable, not only because of the amount of time that passes between the crime and the trial, but also because of the biases and interpretation of the witness.”
Forming Your Thesis

Make sure your research shows through in your thesis. You do not want it to look like solely a personal opinion:

• “Dress codes in schools do not positively effect student learning outcomes because everyone I know hates the dress code so much.”

Try mentioning the research:

• “Dress codes in schools have not been proven to positively effect the student learning outcomes because the research cannot be separated from the socio-economic, education of parents, and location (rural or urban) differences between the schools compared in the research.”
Narrow Again!

- Even after all of the narrowing work you have already done, you may need to further narrow your thesis after you have formed it. For instance, with the dress code topic, which schools? High schools? Maybe you should also set parameters on how strict or lenient the dress codes are or compare private to public schools.
Significant Thesis

Your thesis must also convince readers that your topic is significant to them.

To do this, transform your motive in writing from

• discovering to showing
• and from understanding to explaining and convincing.
You as a Researcher

• What sets you apart as a researcher of the highest order is the ability to develop a question into a problem whose solution is significant to your research community.

Your claim(s) must be supported by research to give credibility to your assertions. (Logos gives you Ethos)
Support Your Claim

• The central element in every report is the claim, main point, or thesis. You cannot simply assert that claim. You have to give your audience good reasons—reliable evidence for believing it.

• **Claim** and **Evidence** constitute the conceptual core of every research report.
Making Strong Claims

• Your claim must be **substantive**.

• Your claim must be **contestable**.

• Your claim must be **specific**.
What is Evidence?

Each of your reasons and claims must be supported by evidence:

- Facts
- Data
- Statistics
- Testimony (personal accounts, interviews)
- Sub-arguments
- Counter-arguments
Reliable Evidence

It is important that you use reliable, empirical, scholarly, published, or proven evidence to increase the persuasiveness of your claim. Your evidence should be:

• **Recent**: Try to use the most recent information you can find.

• **Relevant**: Make sure it applies to your claim.

• **Impartial**: Generally, scientific studies and first-hand accounts are more highly regarded.

• **Sufficient**: You must have enough examples to justify your point. This will help you avoid hasty generalizations.
Final Thoughts

• Remember your thesis is more than just a roadmap of what you are planning to discuss. It is also a claim that you intend to prove and persuade your audience to believe.

• You may need to go back and change or narrow your thesis further after you have written the paper. It is important to be as specific as you possibly can, and sometimes you may find in writing and researching your paper, that your thesis was initially too broad.
Works Cited

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• You can call 940-898-2341 for an appointment, or stop by room 129 of CFO for information!

• We would be glad to assist you with any of your writing assignments and questions!

• You can also visit our website at www.twu.edu/writesite for online tutorials and to submit papers to our online writing lab (the OWL)!