



DEVELOPING A CENTRAL IDEA OR “THESIS”

What Is a “Thesis”?

Any scholarly paper is, above all, an exercise in stating, developing and defending an idea. The heart of any academic essay is a single idea (or perhaps a closely related set of ideas) that you want to explore or defend. The expression of the idea is often called—in “academia-speak”—the *thesis*. Often, the thesis of a paper is a claim you are making or the answer to a question you are asking. Thinking of your central idea as a reasoned claim or a compelling question will help you avoid mistaking a mere statement of opinion for a good thesis.

Before You Find a Thesis

Coming up with your central idea is the biggest problem you have to solve before you begin to craft a defense of your ideas or write a draft of your essay, but this does not mean that writing your thesis is the first thing you should do. Good, experienced, scholarly writers do a lot of work—reading, thinking, discussing ideas, and frequently some exploratory writing—before they choose the one idea they want to present to their readers. Even after finding a thesis, they refine and revise their ideas as they write. It can be useful and reassuring to keep in mind that scholars develop as well as discover theses. If you are having difficulty generating ideas for a thesis, you might want to take a look at the Writing Center handouts on “Finding a Topic” and “Getting Started.”

An Example of How One Writer Developed a Thesis

Unfortunately, there's no handy formula for asking an interesting question or finding a claim with the sort of features that make it a good topic for a paper; much of what you have to do is take a reasonable guess and then adjust your plans as you go along. The best advice is always to focus on something that *interests* you, and about which you can make an argument.

For example, suppose a student is intrigued by a lecture about the philosopher Nietzsche that makes the point that psychology has its origins in theories of the mind, such as Nietzsche's. The student then becomes particularly interested in how this might apply to Freud. Now the claim that the only way to understand Freud is in the context of the history of philosophy is a very big claim that cannot be defended in a single paper. (Just think of how long it would take merely to sketch the views of all of the philosophers who may have influenced Freud.) Before the student can decide what she has to write about, she has to articulate a claim or ask a question that isn't too big to be handled in a 15-page paper (or whatever length is required). She also has to find a thesis that is substantial enough to give her something to say. While the claim that Freud has to be understood in the context of the history of philosophy is too much to deal with in a single paper, the claim that Freud was an important psychologist, for example, is not substantial enough.

That claim is not very controversial, so there is no reason to try to defend it; who would you try to convince?

Suppose the student narrows her idea down by saying that she believes that the best way to understand Freud's theory of the unconscious is to see it as a development of Nietzsche's theory of the unconscious. It may turn out that even that is too big a claim, and perhaps she will have to narrow it further. For the time being, however, her claim or thesis is: *Freud's theory of the unconscious is a development of Nietzsche's theory of the unconscious*. That's the center of her paper, and the fact that she can express it clearly in a single sentence means that she has a good handle on the idea.

State Your Main Point Concisely and Early

In most cases, it is best to state your main idea in the first paragraph of your essay, so that your reader knows right away what it is that you are going to argue in the rest of the paper. In academic writing it is conventional *not* to keep your audience guessing about what your point is; so save your desire for a cliff-hanger for another writing project, and state your purpose early. It is also best to condense your claim into a single sentence. While occasionally you will come across a thesis that is so complex it requires 2 or 3 sentences, being able to express your main idea in one sentence is a sign that you have a good grasp of your subject. After you've stated your thesis and explained it in your introductory paragraph, then you are free to devote most of your paper to explaining why your thesis is valid.

Related Writing Center Handouts

Finding a Topic

Getting Started

Developing an Argument

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