

Asian American Studies 2A: Travels and Migrations
Theresa Tensuan/Ellen Yi
Workshop on Constructing a Thesis*
30 October 1996

What is a Thesis?

A "thesis" is the main point you are trying to get across to your reader; it is the central argument or the controlling purpose behind your essay. A sample thesis is

In *Woman Warrior*, Maxine Hong Kingston casts talkstory as a narrative strategy that brings out the tensions, interdependence, and translations between the storyteller and the audience.

Your thesis doesn't merely summarize a plot, or describe an emotion you felt when you were reading a particular piece of literature; instead, it concisely states your reading, or analysis of a particular aspect of the material. You should be able to base your thesis on specific moments in the work you are analyzing; the thesis stated above is drawn from the first paragraph in the closing section of "No Name Woman" which shows the dynamics between Brave Orchid and the narrator, and the context in which their interaction takes place. In determining your thesis, take into account the different views one could take -- if there aren't other perspectives, you may not have a thesis worth pursuing.

Thesis statements don't have to be limited to one or two sentences; they may take a little longer to summarize, depending on the depth and length of your paper. But if you can't boil down your main argument into a few precise sentences, you probably need to narrow your focus.

For the purposes of this class, your thesis statement should appear in the very first paragraph of your essay. Please do not preface your paper with sweeping generalizations such as "Since the dawn of time..." or "As in all Asian American literature..." Your first paragraph should tell your readers exactly what your purpose is, and give them an idea of how you plan to go about proving your claims. Despite the fact that it comes first in your paper, your thesis statement and opening paragraph may be the very last thing that you write in any draft - especially the final version - of your paper. In the actual body of the paper you develop for yourself, and "show" to your reader, the grounds on which you base your thesis statement. While the thesis is the first thing that you "tell" your reader, it has actually been preceded by a significant amount of thought and writing.

Team Journal Group Activity

What thesis statement could you formulate in response to the question "What do you have to do to succeed in Asian American Studies 2A?" (note the allusion to *a.k.a. Don Bonus*) Take five minutes to come up with a thesis, and to identify at least three observations, insights, or claims that could support your statement.

Now that I know what a thesis is, where can I get one?

Your thesis statement will be an evolution of your working thesis, which you will build from the insights and ideas that you have developed in your five finger exercise. During the last part of today's class, you will review your five finger exercise to find the three points in your response that are, in your opinion, the most interesting insights and ideas that you hit upon. These three points may be three different stages in the evolution of

* Ellen and Theresa have based this workshop on strategies drawn from the work of Lisa Lampert, Elaine Greco, and Peter Elbow.

an idea; they may be three different views of the same problem; they could well be three radically different insights and perspectives. On the back of your response, write down the three points. Briefly congratulate yourself on your stunning critical insights, then think about a question or a statement that you can formulate from one, or a combination, of these points. Write down your new, working thesis question/statement/formulation.

Where to go from here: Peter Elbow's Looping Exercise

Looping is an extended and somewhat more controlled version of freewriting, alternating freewriting with analysis and the careful formulation of ideas.

1. Look at your working question/thesis/formulation
 2. Freewrite for five or ten minutes.
 3. Reread what you have written. Look for the center of gravity, or the "heart" of your ideas - the image, detail, issue or problem that seems richest or most intriguing, compelling or productive. Write a summary sentence that expresses this understanding.
- Repeat the loop until you have adequately explored your idea.