

■ Writing Assignments for a Specific Audience

1. Assuming an audience of junior high students, write a couple of paragraphs explaining the concept of voice in a writer's work.
2. Write two letters to the editor of your local newspaper complaining about a problem in your neighborhood. In the first letter, try to sound impatient and angry. In the second, let your voice be that of a reasonable but concerned citizen. State which of the two approaches you consider more effective and likely to garner results.

■ Real-Life Student Writing

A Thank-You Note to an Aunt

The thank-you note continues to flourish even in these days of email and instant communication by telephone. Nothing can replace the personal touch found in a handwritten note. Here, for example, is a student's note thanking her aunt for a graduation present.

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Thank You . . .

Dear Auntie Jo-Jo:

Thanks tons for the \$50.00 graduation present. I didn't place it in a savings account because you said to spend it on something personal. Well, I thought you might want to know how prudently I spent the money. I went to T. J. Maxx, my favorite discount store, where I always get amazing deals. Believe it or not, for \$50.00 I bought a smart-looking DKNY argyle sweater and a pair of navy corduroy pants. I'm sure my friends think I have been spending profligately at Neiman Marcus. I wish every college student had an adorable aunt like you. You have been far better than Auntie Mame.

Much love,
Trudi

P.S. I painted this card myself; hope you like it.



Stumped by the passive voice? Exit on

CHAPTER 5

The Writer's Thesis

■ Road Map to Thesis

The thesis is a single sentence that announces to your reader exactly what you intend to argue, to prove, to refute, to describe, to tell, or to explain. By convention, it is usually the final sentence of the first paragraph. Of course, this is not the only place a thesis can appear. However, the final sentence of the first paragraph has evolved in classroom compositions as the most effective niche for the thesis, especially in the 500-word essay, which students are usually asked to write.

The idea of the thesis is an old one that has survived for the simple reason that it works. Writers generally write better when they know exactly what they have to say, and readers usually are better able to follow a writer's thought development when they know the main point of a written work. For example, consider this thesis statement from an actual student essay:

Our government must assume the responsibility of caring for the thousands of homeless mentally ill people who are now forced to roam the streets because of changes in governmental policy.

This thesis tells us, in a nutshell, what the student intends to argue. We expect her to show us how changes in governmental policy have caused thousands of the mentally ill to become homeless. We also expect her to argue the moral rightness of helping them.

The thesis, then, is the main point of your essay summed up in a single sentence. In it, you tell the reader where you stand on the issue, what subtopics you intend to cover, and in what order.

Finding Your Thesis

Let us say, for example, your assignment is to write an essay about a sport or recreation you enjoy. You muse and think and finally decide to write about sailing. That is your topic. It is a usable topic because it falls under a general subject. If you had

decided to do an essay on the composition of mosaic tile or on the Roman technique of road building, you would have strayed from the subject, because neither is a sport or recreation.

So sailing will be your topic. You think some more and decide to write an essay on the joys of sailing. Note, by the way, that you could have chosen to write about the boredom and work of sailing; you could also have slanted your essay any number of other ways. But you love sailing and think it a wonderful sport, so you decide to sing its praises in your essay. The joy of sailing will be your main point.

Next, you must express this main point in a thesis. One way to do this is to write down the main point on the top of a page either as a sentence or a fragment—sailing is a wonderful sport; sailing is a joy; sailing is a relaxing recreation—and then ask yourself questions about it. Write down the questions as they occur to you. Perhaps you will come up with a list of questions such as these:

Main Point: Sailing is a wonderful sport.

Why do I love sailing as much as I do?

What are the benefits of sailing?

Why is sailing such a popular sport?

Why is sailing so relaxing?

What does sailing teach?

To find your thesis, choose the question that seems most appropriate to your main point, audience, and assignment, and answer it in a single, detailed sentence. This means you must make a decision about whether the instructor wants a personal essay—one heavy with “I” pronouns and emphasizing your own experiences with sailing—or an impersonal essay that presents its ideas in an objective style. For example, you might answer the last question this way:

Sailing is a delightful sport that teaches independence, balance, and navigation.

Now you have a thesis. You also have a sketch of your essay's subtopics. First, you will explain how sailing teaches independence; next, how it teaches balance; finally, how it teaches navigation. You will draw on your personal experiences and anecdotes as a sailor to amplify these points.

Answering a different question will obviously give you another thesis. For example, if your instructor makes it clear that the essay may be based on your own experiences, answering the first question would give you a thesis suitable for a personal essay:

I love the exhilaration, the freedom, and the adventure of sailing.

You now have a thesis that emphasizes your personal views of sailing.

When you do have your thesis, write it on a sticky note and stick it on your computer. It is a promise you make to your reader, and you must be faithful to it in the essay by covering the subtopics in the exact order of occurrence in your thesis. This means, for

example, that in writing an essay on the joy of sailing, you must first discuss the exhilaration, and then the freedom, and finally the adventure of sailing. And you should discuss nothing else but these three points.

Key Words in the Thesis

Every thesis contains one or more key words that represent ideas on which the essay will focus. In effect, these key words are ideas that the essay must amplify with definitions, examples, and explanations. Each of the following theses, for example, contains a single key word, which is highlighted:

Pheasant hunting is a **tiring** sport.

I am a **jealous** person.

Investing in the stock market is **risky**.

Most of the time, however, theses will contain several key words:

Good English is **clear**, **appropriate**, and **vivid**.

Studies show that, as children, the real achievers in our society were **independent** and **spirited**.

Riding a bicycle to work has several advantages over driving a car.

Islam requires that women learn **obedience**, **self-discipline**, and **subordination**.

Occasionally, the thesis will contain a proposition that is inseparable from its individual words. The essay will have to amplify the whole statement:

Students should be advised against majoring in subjects in which job prospects are limited.

If the United States is to survive, Americans will have to learn to conserve their country's resources.

Characteristics of a Good Thesis

The precision with which you word your thesis will help determine the quality of your essay. At a minimum, a good thesis predicts, controls, and obligates.

The Thesis Predicts A good thesis will contain a discussible idea while also suggesting to the writer a method of developing it. (For more on methods of development, see Part Two of this book.) Some propositions, however, such as the following, are so self-evident that they warrant no further discussion:

A relationship exists between excessive eating and gaining weight.

Rich people usually live in big houses.

In our country, movie stars are greatly admired.

None of these statements contains a discussible idea on which one might enlarge in a whole essay; their wording suggests no method of development. They would, therefore, not make good theses. In contrast, the following thesis not only contains discussible assertions but also predicts a likely method of development:

Being a student reporter for the local paper means conducting interviews at odd hours and in strange places.

One immediately wonders, at what odd hours and in which strange places? The most obvious method of development for such a thesis is by illustration/exemplification (see Chapter 11). The reader expects more particulars about interviews at odd hours and in strange places, and the writer knows that he or she must find examples of these and work them into the essay. This sentence would make a good thesis.

Consider another example of how a properly worded thesis can predict the development of an essay:

Because of the computer revolution and the premium it places on educational skills, many people over the age of twenty-one are enrolling in colleges today.

This is a “reason why” thesis, one that predicts the development of the essay primarily by an analysis of cause (see Chapter 15).

Common sense tells us that it is easier to write the essay whose method of development is predicted in the wording of its thesis than the one for which some developmental pattern must be found during the actual writing. Wording the thesis so that it predicts not only what you will say, but the pattern of development in which you will say it, can help you write a better essay.

The Thesis Controls The thesis controls the essay by restricting you to a specific order of topics or by presenting an obvious organizing principle for the essay (for more on patterns of organization, see Chapter 6 and the introduction to Chapter 8). Consider this term paper thesis, for example:

Today, religion is no longer the uncontested center and ruler of human life, because Protestantism, science, and capitalism have brought about a secularized world.

Implicit in this thesis are a certain number and order of subtopics:

1. A description of medieval society when religion was the center of human existence
2. An explanation of how Protestantism secularized the world
3. An explanation of how science secularized the world
4. An explanation of how capitalism secularized the world

The advantage of this thesis is obvious. You do not have to cast around wondering what you should say next, for you know what your subtopics are and in what order they

should occur. Moreover, the wording of the thesis tells you the kind of information you need to look up in the library.

Sometimes a thesis will control an essay by presenting the writer with a ready-made scheme of organization. Consider, for example, this thesis:

My religious outlook has been shaped by three distinct phases of belief and disbelief in my life.

This thesis requires a chronological organization, with the writer detailing her religious beliefs from the earliest to the present. Note, however, that this thesis is suitable only for a personal essay; you could not write an objective essay on it without some drastic rewording.

Consider, on the other hand, this thesis:

A winning tennis strategy requires a player to have a grasp of the geometry of the playing surface and to work to cut off the angle of an opponent's shots.

This thesis cries out for an essay organized by a spatial pattern. You could divide the playing surface into three zones—backcourt, midcourt, and net—and show how a player might win by maneuvering within them to cut off the angle of an opponent's shots.

The Thesis Obligates When a writer strays from the thesis, the result is often vague, unfocused writing. If the thesis is “Police officers spend more time controlling traffic and providing information than they spend enforcing the law,” then you must prove this point in your essay. You should not rhapsodize about the heroism of the police or complain about police brutality. Likewise, if your thesis is “California college students are more sexually liberated than their New York counterparts,” then that is the only point you should discuss. You should not write about the disputed intellectual superiority of New York college students or weave in facts about vegetarianism in California, unless these issues are somehow related to the sexual behavior of college students in New York and California.

However, it follows that in a focused essay the wording of the thesis must obligate the writer to discuss a single issue. Consider this thesis, for example:

Definitions of obscenity change as society changes, and the courts' decisions on censorship reflect the legal profession's confusion on the issue.

This thesis is pulling in two directions. The first part of it requires a discussion of how definitions of obscenity reflect changes in society, while the second part leads to a discussion of the legal profession's confusion on obscenity. An essay based on this thesis would fall into two mismatched parts. The student should rewrite the thesis until it discusses a single issue. Here is a suggested revision of the thesis, which unifies its two parts and commits the writer to a single idea:

Because definitions of obscenity change as society changes, the courts have handed down some contradictory decisions on censorship.

Although many students worry about making their theses too restrictive, this fault is found only rarely in the essays of beginners. Far more common is the overly broad thesis that cannot be adequately developed in a brief essay. For example, none of the following actual student theses is restrictive enough to be dealt with in a short paper:

Parachuting is unbelievable!

The war against Iraq was stupid.

Evaluating college teachers is an interesting idea.

Admittedly, these examples are vaguely worded and overly terse, but they are also not restrictive enough to guide a writer's hand. Ambiguous key words like *unbelievable*, *stupid*, and *interesting* need to be replaced. To predict, control, and obligate the course of an essay, a thesis must be unambiguous, structured, and restrictive. Common sense also tells us that the scope of the thesis must be in proportion to the length of the essay. A broad thesis is not suited to a short essay, nor a narrow thesis to a long essay.

Nine Errors to Avoid in Composing a Thesis

1. **A thesis should not be a fragment.** A fragment is a phrase or dependent clause that is punctuated as if it were a complete sentence. Our objection to using a fragment as a thesis, however, is based neither on punctuation nor on grammar, but on the fact that it is usually too limited or sketchy for a writer to elaborate on in an essay. A fragment simply cannot adequately sum up what your essay will cover, which is what the thesis should do. Here is an example:

Poor: How life is in a racial ghetto.

Better: Residents of a racial ghetto tend to have a higher death rate, a higher infant mortality rate, and a higher unemployment rate than do residents of the suburbs.

2. **A thesis must not be worded as a question** (usually, the answer to the question could be the thesis). The purpose of the thesis is to spell out the main idea of the essay, which is difficult, if not impossible, to do in a question:

Poor: Do Americans really need large refrigerators?

Better: If Americans did their marketing daily, as do most Europeans, they could save energy by using smaller refrigerators.

3. **A thesis should not be too broad.** An overly broad thesis will commit you to write on an idea you may be unable to adequately cover in a short essay. The solution in that case is to rewrite your thesis and begin again. Otherwise, no matter how hard you work, your essay will seem labored and abstract:

Poor: The literature of mythology contains many resurrection stories.

Better: One of the oldest resurrection myths is the story of the Egyptian god Osiris.

4. **A thesis should not contain unrelated elements.** The expression of a single and unified purpose should be your overriding aim in drafting your thesis. You are trying to prove one point, make one case, dramatize one situation. Veteran writers can, of course, complete more than one task in an essay, but this is a skill acquired only with much practice. The beginner is better off framing the thesis to commit the essay to making one point or performing one function. One way to do this is to avoid using a compound sentence as a thesis statement.

A compound sentence is two independent clauses joined by a conjunction. An independent clause is a grammatical construction that can be punctuated to make sense on its own. Two independent clauses automatically imply two different ideas, which may be hard for the writer to keep separate or treat fairly in a single essay without making a muddle of both. Here is an example:

Poor: All novelists seek the truth, and some novelists are good psychologists.

Properly punctuated, each clause expresses a different idea and can stand on its own. "All novelists seek the truth" is one idea. "Some novelists are good psychologists" is the other. Writing an essay on this thesis will require the writer to prove two unrelated points.

Better: In their attempt to probe human nature, many novelists become excellent psychologists.

5. **A thesis should not contain phrases like "I think" or "in my opinion" because they weaken a writer's argument.** Use the thesis to tell your reader plainly where you stand, what you think, or what you intend to prove in the essay. This is no place to be wishy-washy or uncertain, as if you are not quite sure about your opinion or viewpoint. Indeed, if you are not sure about the opinion expressed in your thesis, you should rethink it until you are.

Poor: In my opinion, smoking should be outlawed because of the adverse health effects of "passive smoking."

Better: Smoking should be outlawed because of the adverse health effects of "passive smoking."

6. **A thesis should not be expressed in vague language.** With only rare exceptions, it is a general truth that the vague thesis will lead to a vague essay. If the thesis is vaguely worded, it is usually because the writer is uncertain of what to say or has not sufficiently thought through the controlling idea. Should that happen to you, rethink your views on the topic.

Poor: Religion should not be included in the school curriculum because it can cause trouble.

Better: Religion should not be included in the school curriculum because it is a highly personal commitment.

7. **A thesis must not be expressed in muddled or incoherent language.** If the thesis is incoherent or muddled, the essay is likely to follow suit. Work on your thesis until it expresses exactly the opinion or viewpoint you intend to cover in the essay.

Poor: The benefits of clarity and easy communication of a unified language compel a state to adopt codes to the effect that make bilingualism possible but preserving a single official language for transacting business and social intercourse.

Better: The benefits of clarity and easy communication offered by a single official language in a state are compelling and persuasive.

8. **A thesis should not be expressed in figurative language.** Figurative language has a place in factual writing, but not in a thesis statement. As we have stressed, the thesis is where you plainly state the main point of your essay. Figurative language tends to weaken this healthy plainness and should, therefore, never be used in a thesis.

Poor: The Amazons of today are trying to purge all the stag words from our language.

Better: Today's feminists are trying to eliminate the use of sex-biased words from public documents and publications.

9. **A thesis must not be nonsensical.** Above all else, your thesis statement must make sense. You cannot defend the indefensible or argue the unarguable, nor should you waste ink on behalf of a thesis that is absurd. For example, consider this sentence:

Poor: A good university education is one that is useful, fulfilling, and doesn't require study.

As a thesis, it is virtually useless, even though it does predict, control, and obligate. The problem is that its proposition is plainly nonsense. We cannot conceive of a good university education that doesn't require study. Only a frivolous essay could be written on such a thesis.

Better: A good university education is one that is useful, fulfilling, and challenging.

We are not suggesting that your theses should always advance narrowly orthodox or boringly conventional ideas, but the ideas they contain should be sensible enough to merit discussion by reasonable people.

The Explicit versus the Implicit Thesis

Anyone who has ever listened to a speaker ramble or read a piece of aimless writing can readily appreciate the usefulness of a thesis statement that sets down clearly the writer's main point. However, not all writers find it necessary to be explicit about their main points. Veteran writers know how to make a main point and stick faithfully to it without broadcasting it in a thesis statement. A conspicuous example of this is the essay "Once More to the Lake," reprinted in Chapter 17. In that essay, the writer sticks to the point without ever expressing it in a single thesis sentence.

As a matter of fact, many veteran writers do not need or use a thesis. Yet they always write with a built-in sense of structure; they do not stray from the point or lose their train of thought. The explicit thesis admittedly has become a requirement of classroom writing, but while it is a useful device for the inexperienced, it can be too simplistic for the professional writer—too much of a formula. Later, as you become a more experienced writer, you, too, might abandon the use of the explicit thesis. But for now, it is a convention that will help you write better essays.

EXERCISES

- Formulate a thesis for one of the following topics. Use the step-by-step method outlined in the chapter.
 - Adolescence
 - Women and the military
 - Obligations of parents
 - The entertainment world
 - Spectator sports
- Find a picture that expresses some aspect of today's society, such as students protesting, someone reading a Kindle, a scene from *Dancing with the Stars*, or people attending a church service; then write a thesis that could serve as an appropriate caption.
- Underline the key words of the following theses:
 - Memory entails recall, recognition, and revival.
 - An argument must present both sides of the question being debated.
 - The Amish people resist public education because they believe that a simple farm life is best and that formal education will corrupt their young people.
 - A good farmer cooperates with weather, soil, and seed.
 - Laura in "Flowering Judas" by Katherine Anne Porter is tortured by doubt, guilt, and disappointment.
 - The racetracks, the ballparks, the fight rings, and the gridirons draw crowds in increasing numbers.
- Which of the following theses is the best? Support your choice.
 - Forest fires are enormously destructive because they ravage the land, create problems for flood control, and destroy useful lumber.
 - Installment buying is of great benefit to the economy, having in mind the consumer to use a product while paying for it and being like forced savings.
 - Television is a handicap.
- The following theses are poorly worded. Analyze their weaknesses in terms of the nine errors discussed earlier, and rewrite each to make it clear and effective.
 - In my opinion, birth control is the most urgent need in today's world.
 - Just how far should the law go in its tolerance of pornography?