

Writing a Thesis and Making an Argument

Almost every assignment you complete for a history course will ask you to make an argument. Your instructors will often call this your "thesis" -- your position on a subject.

What is an Argument?

An argument takes a stand on an issue. It seeks to persuade an audience of a point of view in much the same way that a lawyer argues a case in a court of law. It is **NOT** a description or a summary.

- This is an argument: "This paper argues that the movie JFK is inaccurate in its portrayal of President Kennedy."
- This is not an argument: "In this paper, I will describe the portrayal of President Kennedy that is shown in the movie JFK."

What is a Thesis?

A thesis statement is a sentence in which you state an argument about a topic and then describe, briefly, how you will prove your argument.

- This is an argument, but not yet a thesis: "The movie 'JFK' inaccurately portrays President Kennedy."
- This is a thesis: "The movie 'JFK' inaccurately portrays President Kennedy because of the way it ignores Kennedy's youth, his relationship with his father, and the findings of the Warren Commission."

A thesis makes a specific statement to the reader about what you will be trying to argue. Your thesis can be a few sentences long, but should not be longer than a paragraph. Do not begin to state evidence or use examples in your thesis paragraph.

A Thesis Helps You and Your Reader

Your blueprint for writing:

- Helps you determine your focus and clarify your ideas.
- Provides a "hook" on which you can "hang" your topic sentences.
- Can (and should) be revised as you further refine your evidence and arguments. New evidence often requires you to change your thesis.
- Gives your paper a unified structure and point.

Your reader's blueprint for reading:

- Serves as a "map" to follow through your paper.
- Keeps the reader focused on your argument.
- Signals to the reader your main points.
- Engages the reader in your argument.

Tips for Writing a Good Thesis

- **Find a Focus:** Choose a thesis that explores an aspect of your topic that is important to you, or that allows you to say something new about your topic. For example, if your paper topic asks you to analyze women's domestic labor during the early nineteenth century, you might decide to focus on the products they made from scratch at home.
- **Look for Pattern:** After determining a general focus, go back and look more closely at your evidence. As you re-examine your evidence and identify patterns, you will develop your argument and some conclusions. For example, you might find that as industrialization increased, women made fewer textiles at home, but retained their butter and soap making tasks.

Strategies for Developing a Thesis Statement

Idea 1. If your paper assignment asks you to answer a specific question, turn the question into an assertion and give reasons for your opinion.

Assignment: How did domestic labor change between 1820 and 1860? Why were the changes in their work important for the growth of the United States?

Beginning thesis: Between 1820 and 1860 women's domestic labor changed as women stopped producing home-made fabric, although they continued to sew their families' clothes, as well as to produce butter and soap. With the cash women earned from the sale of their butter and soap they purchased ready-made cloth, which in turn, helped increase industrial production in the United States before the Civil War.

Idea 2. Write a sentence that summarizes the main idea of the essay you plan to write.

Main Idea: Women's labor in their homes during the first half of the nineteenth century contributed to the growth of the national economy.

Idea 3. Spend time "mulling over" your topic. Make a list of the ideas you want to include in the essay, then think about how to group them under several different headings. Often, you will see an organizational plan emerge from the sorting process.

Idea 4. Use a formula to develop a working thesis statement (which you will need to revise later). Here are a few examples:

1. Although most readers of _____ have argued that _____, closer examination shows that _____.
2. _____ uses _____ and _____ to prove that _____.
3. Phenomenon X is a result of the combination of _____, _____, and _____.

These formulas share two characteristics all thesis statements should have: they state an argument and they reveal how you will make that argument. They are not specific enough, however, and require more work.

Refine

As you work on your essay, your ideas will change and so will your thesis. Here are examples of weak and strong thesis statements.

- **Unspecific thesis:** "Eleanor Roosevelt was a strong leader as First Lady." This thesis lacks an argument. Why was Eleanor Roosevelt a strong leader?
- **Specific thesis:** "Eleanor Roosevelt recreated the role of the First Lady by her active political leadership in the Democratic Party, by lobbying for national legislation, and by fostering women's leadership in the Democratic Party." The second thesis has an argument: Eleanor Roosevelt "recreated" the position of First Lady, and a three-part structure with which to demonstrate just how she remade the job.
- **Unspecific thesis:** "At the end of the nineteenth century French women lawyers experienced difficulty when they attempted to enter the legal profession." No historian could argue with this general statement and uninteresting thesis.
- **Specific thesis:** "At the end of the nineteenth century French women lawyers experienced misogynist attacks from male lawyers when they attempted to enter the legal profession because male lawyers wanted to keep women out of judgeships." This thesis statement asserts that French male lawyers attacked French women lawyers because they feared women as judges, an intriguing and controversial point.

Making an Argument – Every Thesis Deserves Its Day in Court

You are the best (and only!) advocate for your thesis. Your thesis is defenseless without you to prove that it's argument holds up under scrutiny. The jury (i.e., your reader) will expect you, as a good lawyer, to provide evidence to prove your thesis. To prove thesis statements on historical topics, what evidence can an able young lawyer use?

- **Primary sources:** letters, diaries, government documents, an organization's meeting minutes, newspapers.
- **Secondary sources:** articles and books from your class that explain and interpret the historical event or person you are writing about, lecture notes, films or documentaries.

How can you use this evidence?

- Make sure the examples you select from your available evidence address your thesis.
- Use evidence that your reader will believe is credible. This means sifting and sorting your sources, looking for the clearest and fairest. Be sure to identify the biases and shortcomings of each piece of evidence for your reader.
- Use evidence to avoid generalizations. If you assert that all women have been oppressed, what evidence can you use to support this? Using evidence works to check over-general statements.
- Use evidence to address an opposing point of view. How do your sources give examples that refute another historian's interpretation?

Remember -- if in doubt, talk to your instructor.

Thanks to the web page of the University of Wisconsin at Madison's Writing Center for information used in this handout. See <http://www.wisc.edu/writing/Handbook/> for further information.