

How to Develop a Thesis

What is a thesis?

A thesis is the specific point you are making about your topic. The thesis is the position you take on the topic in your essay. Usually, your thesis statement will come at the end of your introduction.

A simple test: If you can say True or False, Yes or No, or I Agree/Disagree about the something, then it is a thesis and not just a topic.

Pick out the theses from the list below:

- Business cycles
- The *Star Wars* trilogy: *Star Wars*, *The Empire Strikes Back*, and *Return of the Jedi*
- Downsizing
- Shakespearean characters who die in the third act
- John Locke's philosophy greatly influenced America's founding fathers
- The origin of baseball in Central New York prior to the Civil War and its growth in popularity in the years after the war
- Ice cream v. cake
- *Moby Dick* is the greatest American novel ever written because of its style, structure, and characterization.
- The alien abduction of high government officials

From topic to thesis

In college you will usually be given a topic by your instructor, so we'll assume that you have a topic and move on to the thesis. The topic is the general subject you're writing about; the thesis narrows down to what you're saying about the topic.

Examples of topics and a thesis that could be used with each:

Topic: Cars

Narrower topic: American cars

Thesis: General Motors makes the best cars.

Topic: Football

Narrower topic: The Super Bowl

Thesis: The Jets won the Super Bowl in 1969 because they had the best passing game, the best offensive line, and the best running game in either league.

Topic: World War II

Narrower topic: The Effects of World War II

Thesis: The Second World War was the most important event in the 20th century, because it destroyed the last of the old political order in Europe, marked the beginning of the end of the European colonial empires, and ushered in a "cold war" from which we are only now starting to recover.

The three-part thesis

A three-part thesis states the three reasons or arguments you will develop in your essay to support your thesis. Three-part theses give your reader an outline of your argument and help keep your paper focused. The theses in the last two examples above are three-part theses.

Techniques for developing a thesis

Narrowing from topic to thesis can be difficult. Here are four techniques to help you narrow down your general topic to a specific thesis:

1. **Free Writing:** Write nonstop on your topic for a short time, say, 3 to 5 minutes. Write whatever comes into your head, without regard to grammar or sentence structure. If you can't think of anything to write, keep writing, "I can't think of anything to write," over and over until you think of something. The important thing is to keep writing.
2. **Brainstorming:** Make a list of everything you can think of on your topic. Don't try, at this stage, to organize your ideas; just let them flow.
3. **Branching:** Write your topic in the middle of a sheet of paper and draw a circle around it. Around this topic write everything you can think of that's related to that topic. Next, draw a line from each related idea to the topic. These ideas become your primary branches. You can continue this process indefinitely by clustering new ideas around each primary branch.
4. **Questioning:** Write down all of the questions you or someone else might have about your topic. You might start with the standard Who, What, Where, Why, Who, and How questions.

Topics for practice

Below is a list of topics. Pick one or two and try to come up with a thesis. You may want to use a technique such as brainstorming or free writing.

- The home run race between Mark McGwire and Sammy Sosa
- Going to the movies
- My freshman year in college
- My favorite vacation spot
- Friendship
- Using a computer
- Television
- Family values
- Music
- The Vietnam War
- Censorship
- Olympic sports

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