



## THESIS STATEMENTS: WHAT, WHERE, WHY, AND HOW

### WHAT IS A THESIS STATEMENT?

The thesis is the central organizing element of an academic paper. The grammatical subject of your thesis sentence should be the subject of your paper.<sup>1</sup> The thesis statement should provide a clear and concise assertion about your topic and a plan for how you will prove or discuss that assertion in the body of the paper. It serves, then, as both a contract with your reader, a promise that you will say *something*, as well as a roadmap to guide your reader through your argumentative journey. There are two essential types of thesis used in most academic essays: the argumentative/analytical and the organizational.

### ARGUMENTATIVE

When you are asked to take a position or analyze a text, problem or situation, your professor likely expects you to develop an argumentative thesis. This argument needs to have an edge; it should not be too obvious or general, but rather offer a unique and personal logic-driven interpretation of a given topic. Nor is it a simple statement of opinion or feelings; rather, it should provide an engaging perspective, supported with evidence, that the reader may not have previously considered.

The following examples come from actual Grinnell student papers.

### HISTORY

*In the span of the long disunity in China after Han, the Chinese worldview, conception of the afterlife, and the concept of filial piety were all dramatically transformed by Buddhism. These changes are evident in various archaeological sites and philosophical writings, for example, the tomb of Ma-wang-tui and the famous story of Mulian. Studying what caused this transformation and in what way this new worldview influenced Chinese beliefs about the afterlife provides an interesting perspective on the phenomenon of cultural integration.*

### ART HISTORY

*Instead of using strong lines, white light, and colossal architectural structures to present a serene and majestic world, in his *Carceri d'Invenzione*, Piranesi presents a dark and twisted world of zig-zagging lines, in which the architectural element is no longer monumental but rather punitive. This new universe, peopled by tortured humans, represents a major paradigm shift from Neo-Classicism to Romanticism.*

---

<sup>1</sup> see: <http://web.grinnell.edu/individuals/dobbs/DrSyntax/index.html>

## **ANTHROPOLOGY**

*I argue that language is not simply a human capability and will prove, using studies about primates, that other animals also employ many of the structures that linguists agree constitute the foundation of language. In the same way that human language consists of syntax, semantics, and pragmatics, primate language has form, context, and response (Escholtz and Alfred 1998: 659-660).*

All three of these authors have taken very clear positions here –one that another scholar could potentially refute. They also set up in precise, specific language how their respective papers will argue for their claim. Note, though, that it sometimes takes more than one sentence to articulate the thesis.

## **ORGANIZATIONAL**

Like the argumentative thesis, the organizational thesis is a way of presenting information in a concise and logical way. While it does not present an argument, it does provide an angle, a narrow and specific approach to the material. Laboratory reports for science courses typically provide that angle since they concentrate on discrete problems and follow a precise format. But organizational theses are common outside of science courses as well; they are useful for summarizing another scholar's thesis, in book reviews, personal statements for post-graduate pursuits, or as a means to outline an argument.

## **BIOLOGY**

*Midday plant water potential of Clarkia. xantiana ssp. xantiana declines across the species' geographic range and is lower near the range edge, indicating that water potential does affect the performance and distribution of C. xantiana ssp. xantiana.*

## **PSYCHOLOGY**

*Drawing upon relevant behavioral and socio-cognitive learning models, this paper will examine first whether a child who grows up with a very ill family member risks developing hypochondriasis and, second, the issue of secondary gain –the benefits one unconsciously gains from a disability.*

## **ARGUMENT SUMMARY –POLITICAL SCIENCE**

*In chapter four of Power & Choice: An Introduction to Political Science, Shively argues that there are four main forms of activity in which the state partakes: the transfer of resources, allocation of subsidies, regulation of citizens' affairs, and the development and administration of such services as defense, education, research and social welfare.*

## **BOOK REVIEW –HISTORY**

*In their books Smuggled Chinese and Forbidden Worker, Ko-Lin Chin and Peter Kwong offer different perspectives on the issue of illegal Chinese immigration to the US;*

*whereas Kwong analyzes the economic and labor reasons behind immigration, Chin takes a more sociological approach. Chinese scholar on Fujian, Yu-e Zhou, offers a third view, tracing the reasons behind Chinese illegal immigrations to Mainland China and analyzing the People's Republic of China's policy on this problem. Taken together, these three perspectives provide a comprehensive picture of illegal Chinese immigration.*

## **POLITICAL SCIENCE**

*In what follows, I analyze the relative advantages and disadvantages of the two major systems of governmental organization—the presidential and parliamentary—and the major electoral systems—proportional and single-member-district-plurality. After analyzing the different structures, I will recommend which system would best maximize stability and flexibility without sacrificing accountability and participation.*

## **WHERE CAN I FIND A THESIS? WHY WOULD I WANT ONE?**

As is clear from the examples, thesis statements are all over campus, in every department and every discipline. They are also out in the “real world,” in magazine and newspaper articles, in office memos and law briefs. This is the main reason why it is essential to figure out what they are and how to write them. As Religious Studies professor Kathleen Skerrett notes, if you don't have one, “It's just blah, blah, blah.”

## **WHERE DOES A THESIS GO IN THE PAPER?**

It is a good idea to articulate your thesis in one to two sentences at the end of your introduction after you have described your topic or set up the problem you plan to address. Placing it here will help you to structure your paper, especially if you keep the thesis in mind as you craft your topic sentences (which should ideally support and reflect your thesis). And it will also help prepare your reader for what follows. You cannot go wrong with putting your thesis in the introduction; it is a standard practice in all academic disciplines.

## **EXAMPLE SHORT INTRODUCTION WITH THESIS –ENGLISH**

*In Beloved, Toni Morrison shows how slavery hinders and destroys the natural development of the mother-child relationship. As the dominant white population treats slaves like animals, sees their reproduction as a form of labor production, and overlooks the importance of family ties in slave families, such abuse leads to serious psychological and pathological disorders among slave families. In the course of three generations in Denver's family, for example, slavery causes the natural feeling of protection in motherhood to gradually increase to an obsessive and passionate state of being that does not allow mother or child to be free from their own binding relationship.*

You could also try formulating a delayed thesis by placing the thesis at the end of your paper. This approach can be very effective because it draws the reader in and maintains her interest, through the force of evidence, until the final conclusion. A delayed thesis approach works particularly well in debate or position papers in which you lay out the

multiple perspectives and complexities of your topic. In such a case, you first present one side of an argument, then offer counterarguments that build inexorably and lend support to your closing thesis. If done well, as Professor Pablo Silva writes, “The reader has no choice in the end; without even seeing the main point in print, he is forced to agree with that point. Even better, he begins to think it was his idea.” However, in papers that don’t hinge explicitly on a debate, the delayed thesis can be tricky because you run the risk of losing your reader, or worse, your own train of thought.

Presenting the antithesis to your argument is usually a good idea. In addition to the delayed thesis mentioned above, there are a few good places to address counterarguments: in your introduction as a lead-in to your own thesis (this strategy adds a nice tension or edge to your opening); throughout the body paragraphs by conceding some points to the opposite position and then systematically rebutting or qualifying them; or in the penultimate paragraph, just before your conclusion, where you would rebut them.

#### **EXAMPLE ANTITHESIS –ECONOMICS**

*Though some of the ideas behind free market environmentalism are innovative and fascinating, I find many aspects of this theory problematic and even disturbing, such as the untold environmental costs and the potential for the rich to get richer and the poor to get poorer.*

The author here concedes certain points and shows how she then plans to invalidate with (it is hoped) stronger evidence of her own. Her personal position on the issue becomes all the more convincing since she confronts counterarguments head-on.

A final structure to consider for the thesis is the thesis-antithesis-synthesis approach. In this format you essentially offer two interpretations for your problem or question –the thesis and then its alternative, the antithesis. In the third part, you synthesize these two elements by showing how the two perspectives can be reconciled into a whole.

#### **EXAMPLE THESIS/ANTITHESIS/SYNTHESIS –FRENCH**

*The French colonization of Indochina was a double-edged sword of sorts; on the one hand, colonizers introduced a cash crop economy and exploited cheap labor in order to amass huge fortunes; on the other, they built roads, hospitals and schools and introduced democratic governing systems. These two elements –exploitative and paternalistic—ironically gave incentive and power to anti-colonial rebellion, for not only did the colonists seek to throw off the chains of their oppression, they used the language and the means of the oppressor to do so.*

### **HOW DO I GET ONE OF THESE THESIS THINGS?**

You can often get help from the assignment in formulating your thesis; although it seems simple, answering the professor’s question (or questions) can provide a solid structure, or at least a provisional one, for your paper. Sometimes, however, you will be asked to write a paper on a topic of your choice. You will need, in this case, to think very hard about

narrowing the subject to fit the scope and length of the assignment. One way to do this is to make up a question. To begin, ask yourself, What do I find interesting, exciting, compelling about this class, text, or problem? Answer that question in a simple statement, then ask yourself some hard questions: Why is this statement significant, interesting, important? What are the implications of this statement? Do I have an angle or an edge? How will I prove my claim? By sketching out answers to these questions, a structure for your paper and your thesis may start to emerge.

## **ENGLISH**

*An examination of the way Jane Austen employs blushing in Pride and Prejudice implies that true love cannot completely overcome social pressure, as it requires the social construction of self-consciousness.*

This thesis sets up a specific and concrete argument by focusing on the act of blushing in this particular novel, and it nicely outlines what is to follow; we can expect the writer to elucidate the tension between true love and social pressure in several textual examples of blushing. The thesis is a little less clear, however, in the second clause; the “it” is presumably true love, but it’s not clear why true love would *require* the construction of self-consciousness. To help alleviate this slight lack of clarity, the author could ask herself why or under what circumstances? She could also add a sentence about why this construction is significant or important to our understanding of the novel.

In considering these questions, the writer produced this new and more specific thesis:

*A close examination of reddened cheeks reveals how blushing serves to unite Elizabeth and Darcy as equals who share the misfortune of gauche families; however, blushing also serves as a public sign of affection, one that other characters, namely Mrs. Gardiner, can read. She uses her knowledge of love (signaled by blushing) to exert the kind of social pressure Elizabeth and Darcy paradoxically sought to escape.*

Another way to get to your thesis is to work backwards from your main sub-arguments. If you know what you want to say in the body paragraphs, sketch out topic sentences for them; then write all of these next to each other to try and determine an over-arching argument. For example, in addition to asking herself Why and How, the author above made an outline of her topic sentences (see below) to then arrive at the more precise thesis above. This strategy is a wonderful way to make sure that your thesis and body paragraphs are truly in line.

*Many of the characters, specifically Lydia, Mr. Wickham, Mrs. Bennet, Mr. Collins and Catherine de Bourgh, do not show shame and create great consternation for Elizabeth, Darcy, Elizabeth and Charlotte.*

*Blushing allows Elizabeth and Darcy to communicate on a physical and visual level, whereas they could not communicate verbally (until the final few chapters) because of Elizabeth’s prejudgment of Darcy and his unsociability.*

*The embarrassment Elizabeth and Darcy both express on behalf of their relations erases class and gender barriers and allows them to communicate as equals.*

*Blushing, the visible sign of embarrassment, thus functions to alert others to the true, unstated feelings of characters in Pride and Prejudice. Mrs. Gardiner understands the language of blushing and, through her letter, exerts pressure on Elizabeth and Darcy.*

This embarrassment allows Elizabeth and Darcy to overcome social obstacles, namely class and status, as well as prejudgments in order to fall in love. However, it is other social obstacles that in fact facilitate their embarrassment and eventual unification.

Don't worry if all of these questions or other brainstorming techniques do not help you formulate a thesis. Very often your argument will become apparent in the course of your writing. You must be careful in this case, however, that it is not only apparent to you. Strive to pull it out of your draft and articulate it explicitly.

## **WHERE CAN I GET A THESIS?**

Bounce ideas off your friends, roommates, parents and professors. Come to the Writing Lab where we can talk with you about strategies, help you hone your thinking, or help you make your thesis more precise, specific and better related to your argument.

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons License. Some rights reserved.