**Guide to a Superb Thesis**

What is a thesis statement?

A thesis statement:

* Tells the reader how you will interpret the significance of the subject matter under discussion.
* Is a road map for the paper; in other words, it tells the reader what to expect from the rest of the paper.
* Directly answers the question asked of you. A thesis is an interpretation of a question or subject, not the subject itself. The subject, or topic, of an essay might be World War II; a thesis must then offer a way to understand the war or the novel that others might dispute.
* Is usually a single sentence at the end of your first paragraph that presents your argument to the reader. The rest of the paper, the body of the essay, gathers and organizes evidence that will persuade the reader of the logic of your interpretation.

How do I get a thesis?

A thesis is the result of a lengthy thinking process. Formulating a thesis is not the first thing you do after reading an essay assignment. Before you develop an argument on any topic, you have to collect and organize evidence, look for possible relationships between known facts (such as surprising contrasts or similarities), and think about the significance of these relationships. Once you do this thinking, you will probably have a “working thesis,” a basic or main idea, an argument that you think you can support with evidence but that may need adjustment/ revision along the way.

How do I know if my thesis is strong?

When reviewing your first draft and its working thesis, ask yourself the following:

* Do I answer the question? Re-reading the question prompt after constructing a working thesis can help you fix an argument that misses the focus of the question.
* Have I taken a position that others might challenge or oppose? Thesis statements that are too vague often do not have a strong argument. If your thesis contains words like “good” or “successful,” see if you could be more specific: Why is something “good”; what makes something “successful”?
* Does my thesis pass the ‘So what?’ test? If a reader’s first response is, “So what?” then you need to clarify, to forge a relationship, or to connect to a larger issue.
* Does my thesis pass the how or why test? If a reader’s first response is “how? Or why?” your thesis may be too open-ended and lack guidance for the reader. See what you can add to give the reader a better take on your position right from the beginning.
* Does my essay support my thesis specifically and without wandering? If your thesis and the body of your essay do not seem to go together, one of them has to change. Remember, always reassess and revise your writing as necessary.

Examples

Question: Compare and contrast the reasons why the North and South fought the Civil War.

*The North and the South fought the Civil War for many reasons, some of which were the same and some different.*

This weak thesis restates the question without providing any additional information. You will expand on this new information in the body of the essay, but it is important that the reader know where you are heading. A reader of this weak thesis may think, “What reasons? How are they the same? How are they different?” Ask yourself these same questions and begin to compare the Northern and Southern attitudes (“The South believed slavery was right, and the North thought slavery was wrong”). Now, push your comparison toward an interpretation: Why did one side think slavery was right and the other side thinks it was wrong? You look again at the evidence and you decide the North believed slavery was immoral while the South believed it upheld their way of life. You write:

*While both sides fought the Civil War over the issue of slavery, the North fought for the moral reasons while the South fought to preserve its own institutions.*

Now you have a working thesis! Included in this working thesis is a reason for the war and some idea of how the two sides disagreed over this reason. As you write the essay, you will probably begin to characterize these differences more precisely and your working thesis may seem vague. Maybe you decide that both sides fought for moral reasons, they just saw morality in different contexts. You end up revising the working thesis into a final thesis that really captures the argument in your paper:

*While both the Northerners and the Southerners believed they fought against tyranny and oppression, Northerners focused on the oppression of slaves while Southerners defended their own rights to property and self-government.*

Compare this to the original weak thesis. This final thesis presents a way of interpreting evidence that illuminates the significance of the question. *Keep in mind that this is one of many possible interpretations of the Civil War- it is not the only right answer to the question.* There isn’t a right answer; there are only strong and weak thesis statements and strong and weak uses of evidence.