

# INSTITUTE WRITING PROGRAM

## THE WRITING CENTER

### Creating a Strong Thesis

A thesis is a clear, focused statement that tells your reader what your paper will argue, prove, or demonstrate. A strong thesis gives your reader a clear idea of what your paper will and won't do and offers your reader a preview of the structure of the paper.

A thesis should be:

- **Contestable:** Your thesis should not be a statement of accepted fact or a general summary of your topic. Your thesis should make an assertion or contestable claim with which a reasonable person might disagree. In other words, your thesis should introduce your reader to an idea or argument that needs proving, rather than a statement that your reader is likely to agree with.
- **Appropriate:** Your thesis should be constructed to respond to the questions and goals of the assignment. If the assignment asks you to respond to specific questions, your thesis should indicate the ways your paper will address those questions. If you are asked to select a specific text, topic, etc., your thesis should make it clear not only what your paper will focus on, but also what it will argue about that focus.
- **Focused:** Your thesis should map out the scope of your argument—it should let your reader know what will be addressed in the paper. Your thesis should provide a specific enough argument that it can be addressed in the length of your paper. In other words, your thesis shouldn't promise to explain all the causes of World War I in five pages. Instead, it might examine one specific cause and explain why it is significant.
- **Identifiable:** Your reader should be able to locate your thesis within your introduction and identify it as your paper's main argument. This does not mean that your thesis must be confined to one sentence—sometimes a longer or more complex argument requires more than one sentence. However, your thesis should not be so long that your reader is unable to separate it from the rest of your introduction.

### Crafting a thesis

Very few people start writing with a complete, finalized thesis statement. Just as your paper will change and evolve as you revise, so will your thesis statement.

### Drafting a tentative thesis

When you start writing your paper, you should have a clear idea of your topic, as well as some initial ideas about what your paper will argue about that topic. Try to develop a tentative thesis or a working hypothesis—a statement that describes what you think your paper will show. Ask yourself how and why questions: Why are your observations and analyses significant? How does your argument introduce your reader to something new or unexpected? Why should your reader be interested in your argument? Once you have a tentative thesis that not only tells your reader what your paper will be about, but also explains what you think you will argue or prove in the paper, it's time to draft the body of your paper. Once you have a complete draft, you can return to your thesis and make sure it reflects both the argument and structure of the paper itself.



## **Revising your thesis**

In order to revise your thesis, you may find it helpful to make a reverse outline of your paper (See the handout on “Flow and Transitions” for more on reverse outlines). Look back over your paper and ask yourself the following questions:

- What are the individual claims the paper makes?
- How do the different ideas in the paper relate to one another?
- How is the paper organized? Why is it organized in that way?
- Why is your paper significant? What does it show or prove to your reader?

Once you’ve answered these questions, look back at your tentative thesis. Is it clear how that thesis relates to each individual paragraph and the claims you make? Does your thesis reflect the organization of your paper? Is the scope of your thesis the same as that of your paper? Now you can revise your thesis with your answers in mind.

## **Thesis checklist**

- Does my thesis identify a specific focus? Does that focus correspond to what I cover in the body paragraphs?
- Does my thesis cover an appropriate scope for the length of my paper?
- Does my thesis tell my reader what my paper argues, demonstrates, or proves?
- Does my thesis do more than summarize my topic? Does it tell my reader something new or unexpected?
- Does my thesis give my reader a preview of the paper’s organization?