

INSTITUTE WRITING PROGRAM

THE WRITING CENTER

Building an Introduction and a Thesis: Three Levels and a Writing Plan

Think of the components of a thesis as levels in a building.

First Level

Summarizes the topic, gives the facts, and lays the foundation. This level of thesis makes observations that are non-controversial: i.e., no reasonable person would disagree with them. Your reader immediately thinks “Yes, this is true.”

Example

America experienced an industrial and commercial revolution in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. Many artisans, such as Paul Revere, attempted to expand their operations to take advantage of new manufacturing techniques, widening markets, and increased consumerism.

Dangers

Do not make it too obvious. Do not generalize and do not use clichés. You might as well say nothing. Focus on what is relevant to your own specific goals: do not discuss something irrelevant, like the nature of art, man’s desire to express himself, your own practice as an artist, etc.; also do not discuss something irrelevant like an artist’s childhood, style of dress, reputation as a ladies’ man, etc., unless it is the exact subject of your paper.

Second Level

Interprets a point of view on the facts of the first story. This level is your thesis. It takes a debatable position on the facts, a position that is not obvious and must be proven, a position that a reasonable person could disagree with. A person reading a good two-level thesis thinks “That’s an interesting point of view; now prove it to me.”

Example

Revere’s successful transitions from silverworking to iron casting to the rolling of copper sheets had a far greater historical impact than those of his peers because he alone served as a government contractor and benefited from industrial espionage. These controversial activities allowed him to overcome the capital and technological limitations that inhibited most other American manufacturing endeavors.

Dangers

Do not choose a topic so straightforward that there is only one possible argument to make. You need to take a position that is one of several possibilities. Do not make your thesis so controversial that it is absurd or idiosyncratic. You cannot ignore the facts of the work and the facts of history and argue anything you like.



The Plan

Tells the reader exactly what you will discuss in the essay (in a sentence or two). This part of the paragraph is called “the plan.” It clearly states what your paper will do.

Example

This essay will compare Revere’s early work in silver to his later work in copper in order to demonstrate the practical, aesthetic and commercial advantages of the copperwork.

Dangers

Do not make it a laundry list of topics you will discuss.

Third Level

Relates the two-level thesis to the bigger picture, explains its *significance*, and sets it in a new context. Think of this story “opening out”—as if it were a balcony—to a wider view. It is the answer you get when you ask of a two-level thesis, “so what?” Address this topic in your conclusion. The reader should think “I see why this argument matters.”

Example

Ultimately, the evidence of Revere’s combination of craft and industrial methods indicates that we should date America’s rise to modernity at an earlier point than previously suggested.

Dangers

Do not get too ambitious and make a claim too big to substantiate. Do not say something vague and mysterious.

Points to Consider

Depending on the assignment, your professor will have different criteria for your essay. Very few college-level essays will be written with only a level one thesis, because most assignments will ask you to do more than just gather information. The level two thesis is most common for college-level writing. It uses gathered information in order to prove your argument. A level three thesis is not always needed but usually appreciated by your professors because it shows them that you can think abstractly beyond the facts put in front of you. Read your assignment prompt carefully and don’t hesitate to speak with your professor to determine which thesis is best for your essay.