

Developing Your Thesis

WRITING A THESIS SENTENCE

No sentence in your paper will vex you as much as the thesis sentence. And with good reason: the thesis sentence is typically that ONE sentence in the paper that asserts, controls, and structures the entire argument. Without a strong persuasive, thoughtful thesis, a paper might seem unfocused, weak, and not worth the reader's time.

Complicating the matter further is that different disciplines have different notions of what constitutes a good thesis sentence. Your English professor might frown on a thesis sentence that says, "This paper will argue X by asserting A, B, and C." Such a thesis would likely be seen as too formulaic. In a Social Science course, on the other hand, a good thesis might be crafted in just that way.

So what makes a good thesis sentence?

Despite the differences from discipline to discipline, a good thesis will generally have the following characteristics:

1. **A good thesis sentence will make a claim.** This doesn't mean that you have to reduce an idea to an "either/or" proposition and then take a stand. Rather, you need to develop an interesting perspective that you can support and defend. This perspective must be more than an observation. "America is violent" is an observation. "Americans are violent because they are fearful" (the position that Michael Moore takes in *Bowling for Columbine*) is an argument. Why? Because it posits a perspective. It makes a claim.

Put another way, a good thesis sentence will inspire (rather than quiet) other points of view. One might argue that America is violent because of its violent entertainment industry. Or because of the proliferation of guns. Or because of the disintegration of the family. In short, if your thesis is positing something that no one can (or would wish to) argue with, then it's not a very good thesis.

2. **A good thesis sentences will control the entire argument.** Your thesis sentence determines what you are required to say in a paper. It also determines what you cannot say. Every paragraph in your paper exists in order to support your thesis. Accordingly, if one of your paragraphs seems irrelevant to your thesis you have two choices: get rid of the paragraph, or rewrite your thesis.

Understand that you don't have a third option: you can't simply stick the idea in without preparing the reader for it in your thesis. The thesis is like a contract between you and your reader. If you introduce ideas that the reader isn't prepared for, you've violated that contract.

3. **A good thesis will provide a structure for your argument.** A good thesis not only signals to the reader what your argument is, but how your argument will be presented. In other words, your thesis sentence should either directly or indirectly suggest the structure of your argument to your reader.

Say, for example, that you are going to argue that "American fearfulness expresses itself in three curious ways: A, B, and C." In this case, the reader understands that

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you are going to have three important points to cover, and that these points will appear in a certain order. If you suggest a particular ordering principle and then abandon it, the reader will feel betrayed, irritated, and confused.

ALTERNATIVES TO THE THESIS SENTENCE

Sometimes, the purpose of a piece of writing is not to make a claim but to raise questions. Other times, a writer wants to leave a matter unresolved, inspiring the reader to create his or her own position. In these cases, the thesis sentence might take other forms: the **thesis question** or the **implied thesis**.

The Thesis Question

As we've said, not every piece of writing sets out to make a claim. If your purpose as a writer is to explore, for instance, the reasons for the 9/11 attacks (a topic for which you are not prepared to make a claim), your thesis might read: "What forces conspired to bring these men to crash four jetliners into American soil?"

You'll note that this question, while provocative, does not offer a sense of the argument's structure. It permits the writer to pursue all ideas, without committing to any. While this freedom might seem appealing, in fact you will find that the lack of a declarative thesis statement requires *more* work: you need to tighten your internal structure and your transitions from paragraph to paragraph so that the essay is clear and the reader can easily follow your line of inquiry.

The Implied Thesis

One of the most fascinating things about a thesis sentence is that it is the most important sentence in a paper - even when it's not there.

Some of our best writers never explicitly declare their thesis. In some essays, you'll find it difficult to point to a single sentence that declares the argument. Still, the essay is coherent and makes a point. In these cases, the writers have used an implied thesis.

Writers use an implied thesis when they want the reader to come to his or her own conclusions about the matter at hand. However, just because the writer doesn't declare the thesis doesn't mean that she was working without one. Good writers will have their thesis clearly stated - either in their own minds, or in their notes for the paper. They may elect not to put the thesis in the paper, but every paragraph, every sentence that they write is controlled by the thesis all the same.

If you decide to write a paper with an implied thesis, be sure that you have a strong grasp of your argument and its structure. Also be sure that you supply adequate transitions, so that the reader can follow your argument with ease.

THE SIX-STEP THESIS FORMATION METHOD

1. Name your focus topic

EXAMPLE: *The Beverly Hill's Diet*

2. Ask a question (make sure it's not obvious!) about your focused topic

EXAMPLE: *Is the Beverly Hill's Diet advisable for the typical college student?*

3. Revise the question into a declarative statement

EXAMPLE: *The Beverly Hills Diet is inadvisable for the typical college student.*

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4. Add a group of words summarizing your key ideas

EXAMPLE: *Because it is inconvenient, unhealthy, and provide only temporary weight loss.*

5. Recognize the opposition

EXAMPLE: *Although it does provide quick weight loss.*

6. Call upon editing to put it all together

EXAMPLE: *Although it does provide quick weight loss, the Beverly Hills Diet is inadvisable for the typical college student because it is inconvenient, unhealthy, and provides only temporary weight loss.*

WILL THIS THESIS SENTENCE MAKE THE GRADE? (A CHECK LIST)

In the end, you may have spent a good deal of time writing your thesis and still not know if it's a good one. Here are some questions to ask yourself.

- Does my thesis sentence attempt to answer (or at least to explore) a challenging intellectual question?
- Is the point I'm making one that would generate discussion and argument, or is it one that would leave people asking, "So what?"
- Is my thesis too vague? Too general? Should I focus on some more specific aspect of my topic?
- Does my thesis deal directly with the topic at hand, or is it a declaration of my personal feelings?
- Does my thesis indicate the direction of my argument? Does it suggest a structure for my paper?
- Does my introductory paragraph define terms important to my thesis? If I am writing a research paper, does my introduction "place" my thesis within the larger, ongoing scholarly discussion about my topic?
- Is the language in my thesis vivid and clear? Have I structured my sentence so that the important information is in the main clause? Have I used subordinate clauses to house less important information? Have I used parallelism to show the relationship between parts of my thesis? In short, is this thesis the very best sentence that it can be?

WHAT ELSE DO YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THESIS SENTENCES?

1. **A good thesis usually relies on a strong introduction, sharing the work.** As your writing becomes more sophisticated, you will find that a one-sentence thesis statement cannot bear the burden of your entire argument. Therefore, you will find yourself relying increasingly on your introduction to lay the groundwork. Use your introduction to explain some of your argument's points and/or to define its terms. Save the "punch" for your thesis. For more information about creating good introductions that can support your thesis sentences, see *Introductions and Conclusions* elsewhere in this website.
2. **The structure of your thesis, along with its introduction, should in some way reflect the logic that brought you to your argument.** It's helpful when structuring your thesis sentence to consider for a moment how it was that you came

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to your argument in the first place. No matter what discipline you are working in, you came to your idea by way of certain observations. For example, perhaps you have noticed in a History of Education course that female college students around the turn of the century seem very often to write about the idea of service to the community. How did you come to that observation? What did you observe first? And, more importantly, **how did you go about exploring the significance of this observation?** Did you investigate other college documents to see if the value of service was explicitly stated there? Or was this value implied in course descriptions, extra curricular possibilities, and so forth? Reconstruct for yourself how you came to your observations, and use this to help you to create a coherent introduction and thesis.

3. **A good working thesis is your best friend.** Those writers who understand the concept of "working thesis" are way ahead of the game. A "working thesis" is a thesis that works for you, helping you to see where your ideas are going. Many students keep their thesis sentence in front of them at all times to help them to control the direction of their argument. But what happens when you stumble onto an idea that your thesis isn't prepared for? Or, more important, what happens when you think everything is going well in your paper and suddenly you arrive at a block? Always return to your working thesis, and give it a critical once-over. You may find that the block in your writing process is related to some limitation in your thesis. Or you may find that hidden somewhere in that working thesis is the germ of an even better idea. Stay in conversation with your thesis throughout the writing process. You'll be surprised at what you can learn from it.

CONSTRUCTING THE THESIS: A WRITER'S CLINIC FOR BEGINNERS

Constructing a good thesis sentence is no easy matter. In creating a thesis, the writer struggles with her own confusion. She seeks to create some order out of the morass of observations she has about a text. If you are willing to endure a little confusion, we'll show you here how it is that a thesis sentence is constructed. As the thesis will pass through several incarnations before it reaches its final form, we advise you to read this section completely from beginning to end.

Ready?

When structuring your thesis sentence, it's helpful to start by considering how it was that you came to your argument in the first place. You arrived at your point of view by way of certain observations and a particular logic. You will expect your reader to arrive at the same conclusion, via the same observations and logic that you yourself used.

Let's imagine that you have been assigned a novel for your English 111 class. You've noticed when reading the book that the author seems to linger on the relatively insignificant action of women putting on their lipstick. You've also noticed that lipstick stains abound in the novel, leaving their mark on glasses, sheets, and so on. Finally, you've noticed that the women characters use lipstick in different ways: Character A puts lipstick on alone in the bathroom, in front of a mirror; Character B puts lipstick on in front of others, but only when they seem on the verge of rejecting her; Character C delights in seeing her incriminating lipstick smears on the shirts and sheets of her lover; Character D wears lipstick only when she goes to have lunch with her ex-lover, as a way of exaggerating the grimace of her pain.

From these observations, you see a pattern at work. Characters A and B use lipstick to mask themselves and their feelings; Characters C and D use lipstick to unmask themselves (or others). Moreover, you notice that the author seems to admire Characters C and D for

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their insistence that emotions be revealed. You think that you have a good idea for a thesis sentence, and so you give it a go: "In X's novel, the characters' seemingly insignificant use of lipstick in fact points to one of the novel's larger themes: the masking and unmasking of the self."

This sentence does mirror for the reader your own process of discovery: it begins with an observation that a seemingly insignificant event has meaning(s) in the novel, and then it classifies those meanings into two categories. In other words, some of your logic is indeed present in the thesis as you've written it.

You'll notice that I've said "some of your logic." It's important to take a second look at this thesis to see what it is that's been left out.

Put yourself in the place of the reader. What does this thesis sentence tell you about the structure of the argument to come? Well, as a potential reader I would expect that first, the writer will provide evidence that lipstick is indeed an important symbol in this novel. Second, I would expect the writer to argue that lipstick signifies a character's desire to mask herself (a common observation). Finally, I would expect the writer to show me how, exactly, lipstick is used to reveal the self.

Now ask yourself what this thesis *doesn't* tell the reader about the argument to come. We understand as readers that this paper is going to be about the masking and unmasking of the self. We understand (because it is common knowledge) that lipstick can be used to create a mask. But how, precisely, does lipstick unmask the self? Here you seem to be pointing to some uncommon use of lipstick, but you haven't even hinted at what that "uncommon use" is, or why it's important. Look closely at your thesis and ask yourself this hard question: Does my thesis give my reader a sense of the real argument to come?

In this case, it doesn't. However, this doesn't mean that the thesis sentence is useless. In fact, even though this thesis doesn't provide the reader with a very good "map" of the essay, it does help you, the writer, to see the overall structure of your argument. In other words, it's a good **working thesis sentence** for your paper.

WHAT IS A WORKING THESIS SENTENCE?

Let's take a minute to define this term.

A thesis sentence, as we've said, is a kind of contract between you and your reader. It asserts, controls, and structures your argument for your reader's ease. A working thesis sentence, on the other hand, is a sentence that you compose in order to make the work of writing easier. It's a sentence that asserts, controls, and structures the argument for you.

The working thesis need not be eloquent. In fact, it can be quite clunky, declaring your argument and then clumsily listing your supporting points. Not to worry: you'll be revising your thesis, and often more than once.

Remember that, as you write, you are bound to come up with new ideas and observations that you'd like to incorporate into your paper. Every time you make a new discovery, your thesis sentence will have to be revised. Sometimes you'll find that you're stuck in your writing. You may need to return to your thesis. Perhaps you haven't clearly defined an important term or condition in your thesis? Maybe that's why you find yourself unable to progress beyond a certain point in your argument?

Revising your working thesis at this juncture could help you to clarify for yourself the direction of your argument. Don't be afraid to revise! In fact, the most important quality of a working thesis sentence is its flexibility. A working thesis needs to keep up with your thinking. It needs to accommodate what you learn as you go along.

Revising the Working Thesis

Let's return now to our in-progress thesis: "In X's novel, the characters' seemingly insignificant use of lipstick in fact points to one of the novel's larger themes: the masking and unmasking of the self." Perhaps this thesis served you well as you were writing the first couple of pages of your paper, but now that you are into the meat of the matter, you are stuck. How, *exactly*, is the writer using lipstick and masks to reveal character? *And what, precisely, is his point in doing so?*

It's at this juncture that you'll probably return to your thesis and discover a) what it doesn't say, and b) what it needs to say. We've already determined that the sentence doesn't really address the most arguable - and interesting - aspect of this argument. Now it's time to ask yourself why this hasn't been addressed. Perhaps you, the writer, haven't yet articulated this part of the argument for yourself? Is this why the thesis (and with it, the paper) seems to trail off?

At this point you should stop drafting the paper and return to the text. Read a bit. Brainstorm a bit. Write another discovery draft. Read a bit more. Ohmygosh! Here is something interesting. You've found a passage in which the writer talks about how the lipstick left behind on a lover's shirt "drew a map for his wife into the dark lands of his infidelities." And you've found another passage in which the jilted lover's bright orange lipstick was "like a road sign, guiding her betrayer to the heart of her pain." In these two passages you see the writer addressing another function of lipstick: that women use it to draw a kind of map. You look for other lipstick examples that might shed more light on the idea of mapping, and you find them. Even better, you discover that all of these examples have something to do with betrayal, guilt, and shame.

In the end, you conclude that lipstick is not being used in this novel just to mask and unmask. Women also use lipstick to *map*. The two are in fact linked:

1. Lipstick masks by concealing real feelings (most often feelings of betrayal, guilt, and shame).
2. Lipstick masks, but in the process reveals or creates a new persona, one who overcomes the feelings of betrayal, guilt, and shame.
3. The author also uses the act of putting on lipstick as a metaphor for mapping. These maps might conceal - that is, they might serve to detour the observer from discovering (or arriving at) the woman's feelings of betrayal, or
4. They might reveal. First, lipstick might draw a map to the truth about a betrayal, as they do for the betrayed wife in the novel. And second, lipstick might be seen as a tool with which a woman maps herself, drawing new borders, re-imagining her own inner landscapes, and re-routing her own destiny.

This idea is very complicated. How do you make a thesis out of this?

Your first try is bound to be clumsy. You need to find a way of putting together all of your important ideas - lipsticks, masks, maps, concealing, revealing, betrayal - into one sentence. Can it be done?

Maybe; maybe not. Let's try:

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While lipstick is used in X's novel to conceal feelings of betrayal, it is also used to reveal the betrayal itself, in that lipstick both masks and maps betrayal, at first allowing women to hide themselves, but later providing them with the possibility to create new selves, and to re-route their lives.

Does this sentence work?

Revising Your Thesis For Eloquence

Clearly not.

For one thing, it is simply too long. You are putting too much information into one sentence. Sometimes writers fail to understand that their argument might best be expressed in a couple of sentences (with one sentence providing background information and the second serving as the thesis). Note the difference such a change would make:

While lipstick is used in X's novel to conceal feelings of betrayal, it is also used to reveal the betrayal itself. Accordingly, lipstick both masks and maps betrayal in this novel, initially allowing women to hide themselves, but later providing them with the possibility to create new selves, and to re-route their lives.

Better? Sure, but it could be better still. You will, of course, want to play with your thesis sentence until it is strong enough to present your complex argument, and clear enough to guide your reader through your paper. But even more than this, you will want to write a thesis sentence that evokes something in the reader. You will want to use language that has some power; you will want to structure the sentence so that it has some "oomph." Pay attention to diction, to syntax, to nuance, and to tone. In short, *write a good sentence*.

Understand that you can revise the thesis sentence above in a number of ways. Ask yourself:

- Is my argument clear?
- Does it present the logic and the structure of my paper?
- Does it emphasize the points I want to emphasize?

Perhaps in the end you decide that the previous sentence seems to make masking and mapping of equal importance to this paper. You've decided that mapping is the more original, stronger idea. So you revise once more, for emphasis. Consider this, then, our final thesis sentence (note how the complete argument now relies on the interaction between two introductory sentences and the thesis statement itself):

*While at first it might appear that lipstick is being used merely to hide the characters' feelings of betrayal, a closer look reveals that its most essential use is actually to **map** the path to the betrayal itself. By using lipstick as the signposts, betrayal can be discovered and navigated. As a result, characters are able to re-draw the borders of their relationships, and to re-route the course of their lives.*

Perfect!