

Establishing a Preliminary Thesis

The thesis – also called thesis statement – is the central, organizing idea or statement of a paper, which gives it direction and coherence. The thesis statement also establishes the scope of the assignment (what will, and what will not be covered).

Descriptive or argumentative?

A thesis can be informative (in the case of a descriptive essay), or argumentative (in the case of an argumentative, or persuasive essay). But they also differ:

The informative thesis is simply a statement that identifies the topic and sums up the contents of the paper (a little like a topic sentence for the whole essay).

The argumentative thesis, on the other hand, must also state an opinion, something that will be debated, argued, and defended in the paper.

As the argumentative thesis is most often required of university assignments, and as it is the most challenging, it will be the focus of this short guide.

**** If you are not sure whether your assignment should be argumentative or not, consult our document on “Understanding the assignment instructions”.**

How to develop a thesis

1) Working from a narrowed down topic or research question

- Turning a narrowed down topic into a research question is a great first step towards establishing a thesis. Example:
 - Narrowed down topic: *Victor’s selfishness in Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein.*
 - Question: *In Frankenstein, why is Victor portrayed as being so selfish?*
- If the instructions already include a research question, the next step is branching directly off of it to find a thesis.

2) Establishing a position

- Coming up with an argumentative position that directly addresses the topic or question is the next step in establishing a thesis statement. As the thesis is argumentative, the position must take a stand and be arguable. Example:
 - Question: *In Frankenstein, why is Victor portrayed as being so selfish?*
 - Answer / preliminary thesis: *In Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein, Victor is portrayed as a selfish person to illustrate a contrast with the monster and show that he (Victor) is the real monster.*
- Having a general or vague idea of what will be argued is not necessarily problematic at this point. The next step will serve to refine this position.

3) Refining the position

- The next step is using research and brainstorming to examine the preliminary thesis from all angles.
- Asking questions (once again!) and incorporating the answers into the thesis statement will make it stronger and more effective:
 - *Who? What? When? Where? Why? How?*
 - *Why is this important? How does this happen? How does this work?*
 - *What is the impact of this? What is the cause?*
- At this point, making sure that each element found in the thesis statement can be supported with arguments is essential. If some elements cannot be supported, they should be removed from the thesis statement.
- Final thesis: *Through the contrast in attitude between Victor and the monster in Frankenstein, Shelley shows that the true horror is not the monster itself, but the selfishness that made Victor abandon it.*

Qualities of a strong thesis

A strong thesis has three important qualities: it should be **specific**, **explanatory**, and **argumentative**.

Specific:

- It should argue a specific aspect of the topic.
- It should be focused enough so that it can be fully explored within the scope of the paper.

Explanatory:

- It should contain some form of reasoning or explanation for the position it holds.
- It should justify the position to some extent. For example, agreeing or disagreeing with something is not enough. The overall reason for agreeing or disagreeing must be provided.

Argumentative:

- It should be debatable. It should take a stand and say something relevant and important about the topic.
- It should not summarize or state the obvious (the purpose of the argumentative paper is to argue, not to observe or to describe).
- It should contain a position, an argument, which will require supporting ideas and evidence.

A strong thesis: an example

Weak thesis: *Mary Shelley's Frankenstein has an interesting cast of characters.*

- **Specific?** Not at all – which characters are interesting? Why are they interesting?
- **Argumentative?** It could be argued, but the thesis is not taking a strong position or making any important claims. It is vague and not very strong.
- **Explanatory?** No – why are they interesting? Why does it matter that they are interesting?

Partial thesis: *In Frankenstein, Mary Shelley produces an important contrast between Victor and the monster.*

- **Specific?** The thesis now talks about two specific characters, and specifies the contrast between them. But what is being contrasted between the two of them?
- **Argumentative?** The thesis is now making a claim about the novel, but it is still just an observation about an obvious theme. It must make a claim about that contrast.
- **Explanatory?** Somewhat – but why is the contrast important? What does the contrast do to the novel?

Strong thesis: *Through the contrast in attitude between Victor and the monster in Frankenstein, Shelley shows that the true horror is not the monster itself, but the selfishness that made Victor abandon it.*

- **Specific?** Yes – the thesis focuses on two characters, on the contrast between their attitudes, and the horror that the novel creates.
- **Argumentative?** Yes – this is an interesting interpretation of the novel. The thesis takes a position and can be challenged and discussed.
- **Explanatory?** Yes – the thesis shows what the contrast does, and makes an interpretation of the novel based on that idea.

More questions?

Remember that you can always write or go speak to your professor or your TA about your assignment, either to obtain clarifications, or to confirm that you are on the right track.

You can also come to the AWHC and make an appointment with one of our writing advisors to discuss any question you might have about the different steps of the writing process:

- Understanding the assignment instructions;
- Narrowing down the topic;
- Brainstorming;
- Establishing a preliminary thesis;
- Research;
- Creating the outline;
- Writing;
- Revision.