

Developing a Thesis Statement

This handout presents a process for developing a thesis statement, or the central argument of a paper. Each of these steps is important, but you might not work in this order, or you might circle back to the same step more than once, as *everyone's writing process is different*, and rarely progresses in a straight line.

1. If there is a writing assignment, analyze it.

Carefully read your writing assignment to identify its **key terms** so that you have a clear idea of your task. In the following examples, the key terms are underlined:

Analyze Spain's neutrality in World War II.

Illustrate the significance of biblical imagery and allusion in Herman Melville's Billy Budd.

Verbs like *analyze* and *illustrate* (also *discuss*, *consider*, *evaluate*) ask for a coherent, unified, and well-supported argument. The other key terms in these examples—"Spain's neutrality," "World War II," "biblical imagery," etc.—indicate the broad topic. Your thesis statement will stake an arguable claim using the key terms from the assignment. If you have *any* doubts about what your assignment is prompting you to do, ask your professor!

2. Narrow your topic.

Even if your writing assignment provides you with a topic, you will likely have to narrow it so you can develop a *specific* and *detailed* argument. You should **focus on one aspect of your topic**. To do this, specify agents/characters, relationships, events, paradoxes, phenomena, sections or elements, etc. within your broader topic and/or add verbs or nouns that imply action. The following focused topics have been derived from the above examples:

Franco's role in the diplomatic relationships between the Allies and the Axis.

The relationship between protagonist Billy Budd as a Christ figure and notions of justice.

3. Ask a question.

This question will guide your analysis of the evidence and help to keep you focused. Therefore, it should be *specific* and *without an obvious answer*. In general, it should *not* elicit a "yes" or "no" response; instead, it should be formulated to elicit a detailed and argumentative response: **how**, **why**, **what is the nature of...**, **to what extent...**, etc. The following questions have been derived from the above topics:

What was the nature of Franco's diplomacy and how did it contribute to Spain's neutrality?

How does Billy Budd's arc as a Christ figure represent or complicate the novel's conflict between man-made justice and God-given/natural justice?



This step is presented separately from step 4, but they are deeply connected and often overlap. You might want to return to your evidence before you draft a question, or you might develop your analysis and central question simultaneously. For more detailed guidance on **developing a research question**, see our [handout on the topic](#).

4. Analyze your evidence.

With your narrowed topic in mind, return to your evidence, likely your primary source(s). It's important to derive your thesis from the evidence, rather than shaping evidence to fit an argument. As you re-read, look for **patterns that point to conclusions**, contradictions or **paradoxes** that raise your interest, and/or **formulate questions** that demand answers.

Your goal in this stage is to generate ideas, analysis, and a coherent perspective. To structure this process, you might use the following tools/strategies:

- [Concept maps](#)
- Close reading and annotation of relevant passages
- [Directed freewriting](#)

5. Draft a tentative answer to your question.

This will be your working thesis, or the “controlling idea” of your paper. This means that everything you write must relate to and ultimately support this idea. Place this statement prominently at the end of your introduction. Your thesis statement should:

- Assert a **contestable argumentative claim** about your topic.
- Be **specific** enough to be proven within your paper.
- Be an **informed position supported with evidence**.

6. Consider counterarguments.

As you draft your paper, don't simply consider the evidence and reasons that support your central argument. Academic arguments are most persuasive when they acknowledge and respond to the possible objections of their readers. As you do this, consider whether and how you might qualify your thesis statement.

7. Revise your thesis as your ideas evolve.

Writing is a form of thinking. This means that your ideas and arguments will likely evolve as you develop them in writing. Make sure your thesis statement reflects this development by revising it at the end of your writing process.

Works Consulted:

University of Wisconsin Madison Writing Center *handout, “Developing a Thesis Statement.”*

<https://writing.wisc.edu/handbook/process/thesis/>.

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