

Creating Strong Thesis Statements

Have you spent an hour or more in the grocery store, traversing the aisles multiple times—tomatillos, onions, cheese, soda, flan, ice cream, peppers, tortillas, beans—only to end up back in the Produce section to get the limes that tie the whole meal together? If so, there's a good chance you arrived at the grocery **without** a well-organized list.

Think of the working thesis as the grocery list of an academic essay. It's not essential, but it's a big help. And it's increasingly helpful the more complicated the essay you're preparing to create, the more sources, information, and connections you have to remember. A working thesis not only helps you organize your paper; it helps you synthesize your research. That's because the process of writing one requires you to hone in on your essential findings as they relate to the larger field of study.

EXERCISE 1: THESIS MAD LIBS (5-10 min)

You are ready to write a working thesis when you can make a *claim* or *argument* based on your research, the claim is sufficiently *specific* for the assignment and field, and the claim is *significant*—worthy of your readers' interest.

Sometimes the easiest way to create a working thesis is by laying out your base argument after conducting your initial research. For this, you might want to try a thesis mad lib!

Sample Prompt: In this essay, analyze a type of television program (e.g., local news, sitcom, medical drama, talk show) and its relationship to its viewership. What expectations does the audience bring to the show, and how—in turn—does the show influence certain beliefs of the audiences?"

NOW, USE THE MAD LIBS OPTIONS TO WORK ON POSSIBLE THESIS

ARGUMENTS:

1.) _____ is the best _____ for _____ because
_____.

2.) _____ should/should not _____ to/as a way
to _____ because _____.

3.) _____ is a positive/negative influence on _____ because _____.

4.) In order to _____ one must _____ or else _____.

Using the second mad lib option, I've created an example thesis:

Ex: **Local News reports should not use graphic reports of violence as a way to bolster ratings because it gives views a false impression of crime in their community.**

Elaborating on your Working Thesis

Once you have a basic claim/argument to work with, you can begin to build and elaborate on your working thesis. One method is to add a qualifying 'although' clause to the beginning of your thesis to acknowledge opposing arguments.

Ex: **Although violent crime is actually decreasing**, regular TV viewers overestimate their neighborhood crime rate and therefore misjudge personal danger to themselves and their families

Then, elaborate on your 'because' clause that ultimately backs up your claim:

Ex. Although violent crime is actually decreasing, regular TV viewers overestimate their neighborhood crime rate by 150% and therefore misjudge personal danger to themselves and their families, **because local TV evening news regularly opens with graphic reports of mayhem and murder in familiar locations, making many believe that crime happens nightly outside their front door.**

While you may cut this extra material in the final thesis, fleshing out these pieces at the working stage will give you a sound structure for your argument:

"(1) Although I acknowledge X, (2) I claim Y, (3) because of reason Z"

EXERCISE 2: THE THESIS TEST (10 min)

Now that you have your working thesis, you are ready to move on to the outlining or even drafting portion of your paper. However, this doesn't mean you're done working on your thesis!

As you finish the rough draft of your paper, return to your working thesis. Reassess it, just as you assessed the contents of your grocery cart in the Publix check-out line—you scan the cart and decide to put back the ice cream because you're over budget and you already bought flan so really, how much dessert do you need?

To check the strength of your thesis statement, see if you can answer *yes* to each of these questions:

- 1.) **Is this a complete sentence (and not a question)?**
- 2.) **Does it have an opposing argument?**
- 3.) **Is the sentence a dead end, or does it call for additional information and explanation?**
- 4.) **Does it present one claim among several or more possible claims?** In other words, could someone else have constructed a different argument from this assignment and research material?
- 5.) **Is it interesting to a reader who is knowledgeable in the field?** If a reader's first response on reading it is "Who cares?" you've failed this test.
- 6.) **Does the essay support the thesis specifically and without wandering?** If your thesis statement is too broad, here's where you should discover that.

If any sentence needs carefully chosen words, it's your thesis. As you finalize the statement, replace vague words and phrases with more precise ones. Consider adding qualifiers (e.g., the data *suggests* rather than the data *shows*) to distinguish informed speculation from absolute facts.

EXERCISE 3: REVISING SAMPLE THESES

In 6 groups of 4, evaluate the following thesis statements based on the below criteria (20 min):

- 1) Cutting classes is like a disease.
- 2) Going to college prepares a person for the future and it is increasingly expensive.
- 3) Older people often imitate teenagers.

- 4) Violence on television can be harmful to children.
- 5) The music business is pretty complicated.
- 6) I don't know how to change the oil in my car.
- 7) There are many different types of students in college today.
- 8) Students have developed a variety of techniques to conceal inadequate study from their instructors and they often get away with it.

Criteria

Each group member should pick TWO of the theses from the list and revise them based on the following criteria

Does the thesis:

- Take a stand?
- Propose a solution?
- Evaluate something?
- State its position clearly and exactly?

Is the thesis:

- Arguable?
- Stated positively and with authority?

After you have evaluated and improved the thesis (if necessary), please rewrite it as a(n):

- Simple thesis
- Expanded thesis
- Thesis statement with an *although* clause

Once you've done this, switch your new list of working thesis statements with the group to your right; use the thesis test to evaluate and give a letter grade (A, B, C, NP) to each of their thesis statements. (10-15 min)

Now, combine groups and discuss. (10-15 min)