7 EVERY THESIS SHOULD HAVE A THESIS

The core of your thesis should be your *argument.* An argument, in this sense, does not mean a dispute or a bald unsupported statement of views. It means a well-reasoned perspective on your subject, supported by logic or evidence, presented fairly.[1]

It's not your opinion, shouted to the whole bar. It's not a truckload of evidence, dumped in your poor reader's lap. It's not a debating game or legal proceeding, in which you present only the facts that help your side. It's not a public relations exercise, where you spin everything to fit some preconceived notion.

It's none of those. Rather, it is your distinctive viewpoint and your conclusions, backed by logical arguments and buttressed by evidence you have assembled, all of it presented honestly, without bias. *This reasoned viewpoint—this argument—is your thesis.*

> ***Definition:*** **An argument is your reasoned perspective on the main subject of your paper, supported by logic or evidence, all presented fairly. The main argument of a book or paper is also called its "thesis."**

A thesis (argument) is your take on the subject, and every thesis (paper) should have one.[2] You may also have some secondary arguments in your

1. This definition of "argument" is close to that of Anthony Weston, *A Rulebook for Arguments,* 2nd ed. (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1992), x–xi.

2. Our ordinary language is confusing about some of the terms. An "argument" can mean either a shouting match in the parking lot or a scholarly statement of views, supported by logic or evidence (whether or not others disagree with it).

Similarly, a "thesis" has two meanings in daily usage. One is the culminating research paper for a BA, an MA, or a PhD. "He completed his thesis." The other is the main argument in any paper, article, or book. "Her book has an interesting thesis." My

paper, covering subsidiary points. But for now, let's concentrate on developing your main argument.

STATE YOUR ARGUMENT CRISPLY

Your main argument should be brief and crisp. No matter how complicated and subtle your overall paper, your argument should be expressed in clear, pointed language. A reader should be able to say, "I agree with that" or "That just can't be right!" To frame an argument like this requires some serious thinking to boil down your views and some intellectual bravery to state them directly, without weasel words.

That won't happen overnight. It takes time to develop your viewpoint and the reasoning behind it, to turn a tentative thesis into a fully developed one. It demands careful thinking about how to support it and how to respond to skeptics. It often requires you to write better than the turgid academic articles you've plowed through, where ideas are cloaked in jargon. Let them be negative models of exposition. Don't let them mislead you into thinking this is the only way to sound intelligent or present research. It isn't. Clarity and simplicity are much better.

Once you have developed an argument, it's important to show how it fits into your field of study. You can do that by stating clearly which authors and which perspectives you are drawing on, and which ones you reject. It's helpful to readers if you differentiate your argument from others and identify these alternatives with specific scholars. For example: "Lipson is obviously wrong, once again, when he says . . . ." The emphasis, however, should be on developing your own position and evaluating it honestly and rigorously.

It takes weeks, sometimes months, to develop a compelling argument. That can be frustrating. But remember, if you knew exactly what you were

title for this chapter plays on these two meanings. "Every Thesis Should Have a Thesis" means every major research paper should have a coherent argument.

The meaning of "thesis" is usually clear from the context. When there might be confusion, I'll say either "paper" or "argument." When I'm referring to the thesis argument, I'll use the interchangeable terms "argument," "thesis argument," and "main argument." Of course, most papers also include secondary arguments about less important points.

going to say before you started, the whole project would be boring—to you and probably to your readers. Most of us begin with some general ideas and puzzling problems, hone the questions, find the right methods to investigate them, and then gradually work out some coherent answers. All this effort pays off in a well-grounded perspective, one that can persuade a skeptical reader.

> ***Tip:*** **Nobody has a clear argument right away. It takes time and hard thinking to hone your perspective and distill it into a few sentences. But the effort is worth it. A succinct, well-reasoned argument is the heart of your thesis project.**

What if you start your thesis project with a tentative argument already in mind? That's fine, as long as you keep an open mind. Ask yourself: "What could change my opinion? What evidence could effectively challenge my view?" If nothing could, then you don't have an argument, you have either a tautology or a theology. That's not what you are aiming for. You want a thoughtful perspective, not circular reasoning. You want a thesis, not a secular religion.

HOW TO DEVELOP A THESIS STATEMENT

How do you come up with a good thesis statement? The best way is to build on your proposal by writing a very brief paper proposing your slant on the subject. It only needs to be paragraph or so, plus a title. If you have more than one idea for the thesis statement, write down each one separately. They should be brief and to the point. If you can express it in a single sentence, so much the better.

This is not supposed to be a polished paper; it is merely a rough statement of your main idea, your prospective argument. There's no need to offer supporting evidence here. As long as this paragraph captures your basic thrust, it can prompt a useful discussion with your adviser.

Even a preliminary thesis argument is helpful because it will guide your research. That's why it is helpful to do it early in the process, perhaps in the third month, after you've completed your background reading.

> ***Tip:*** **Write a preliminary version of your thesis argument after you've completed your background reading. The argument only needs to be a paragraph, or perhaps even a sentence, capturing your main idea. Even this preliminary version will guide your research.**

Both the discussion and the writing process will clarify your thinking and reveal more about your approach. That will lead to another round of brief writing and more discussion as you sharpen your focus and method.

Working on your thesis statement should not delay your research at all. As long as your proposal sends you in the right direction for reading and data collection, you can move ahead on that while you are still developing your argument. In fact, *you are likely to continue refining your main argument throughout the research and writing process.* Your final thesis statement may not be ready until you are near the end of the project.

> ***Tip:*** **To develop a clear thesis statement, you'll need to revise and update your paragraph as your research develops. You'll need to discuss it with your adviser. With revision, discussion, and research, your initial perspective can mature into your thesis argument.**

That's one reason you will probably write the introduction and conclusion of your paper last. The introduction is where you will initially state your argument. The conclusion is where you will return to evaluate it, based on the research presented in the middle sections of the paper.

EXAMPLES OF THESIS STATEMENTS FROM DIFFERENT FIELDS

What does a clear, strong thesis statement actually look like? You can see for yourself by reviewing the research articles you've been reading. Look at the best ones, the ones you really liked. Most will have a thesis statement (that is, their major argument) in the introduction or conclusion. To illustrate, let's consider some thesis statements from leading figures across a range of fields. They serve as academic models worthy of emulation.

***Tip:* As part of your thesis reading, look for clear arguments to serve as models. You find them in the best books and articles.**

Here is Robert Nozick's introduction to *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*, one of the most influential—and controversial—works of philosophy in the past half century:

> Individuals have rights, and there are things no person or group may do to them (without violating their rights). . . . How much room do individual rights leave for the state? The nature of the state, its legitimate functions and its justifications, if any, is the central concern of this book . . . .
>
> Our main conclusions about the state are that a minimal state, limited to the narrow functions of protection against force, theft, fraud, enforcement of contracts, and so on, is justified; that any more extensive state will violate persons' rights not to be forced to do certain things, and is unjustified; and the minimal state is inspiring as well as right. Two noteworthy implications are that the state may not use its coercive apparatus for the purpose of getting some citizens to aid others, or in order to prohibit activities to people for their *own* good or protection.[3]

Here is Max Weber, summarizing his complicated analysis in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism:*

> What the great religious epoch of the seventeenth century bequeathed to its utilitarian successor was, however, an amazingly good . . . conscience in the acquisition of money, so long as it took place legally. . . . A specifically bourgeois economic ethic had grown up. With the consciousness of standing in the fullness of God's grace and being visibly blessed by Him, the bourgeois business man, as long as he remained within the bounds of formal correctness, as long as his moral conduct was spotless and the use to which he put his wealth was not objectionable, could follow his pecuniary interests as he would and feel that he was fulfilling a duty in doing so. The power of religious asceticism provided him in addition with sober, conscientious, and unusually industrious workmen, who clung to their work as to a life purpose willed by God.[4]

3. Robert Nozick, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* (New York: Basic Books, 1974), ix.

Friedrich Hayek wrote his influential *Road to Serfdom* in the midst of World War II, warning that increased planning by Western governments carried a profound hidden danger. Here is his thesis:

> For at least twenty-five years before the specter of totalitarianism became a real threat, we had progressively been moving away from the basic ideas on which Western civilization has been built. That this movement on which we have entered with such high hopes and ambitions should have brought us face to face with the totalitarian horror has come as a profound shock to this generation, which still refuses to connect the two facts. Yet this development merely confirms the warnings of the fathers of the liberal philosophy which we still profess. We have progressively abandoned that freedom in economic affairs without which personal and political freedom has never existed in the past.[5]

Some think that historical studies don't have such theses. After all, they are filled with detail and rarely seek to generalize their findings to other countries or other periods. Still, the best studies synthesize what they have found about their own time and place. They fuse the myriad details into a meaningful picture. Here is John W. Dower's eloquent summary argument from *Embracing Defeat: Japan in the Wake of World War II:*

> To understand the Japan that stands at the cusp of the twenty-first century, however, it is more useful to look not for the *longue durée* of an inexorably unfolding national experience, but rather at a cycle of recent history that began in the late 1920s and essentially ended in 1989. When this short, violent, innovative epoch is scrutinized, much of what has been characterized as a postwar "Japanese model" proves to [be] a hybrid Japanese-American model: forged in war, intensified through defeat and occupation, and maintained over the ensuing decades out of an abiding fear of national vulnerability and a widespread belief that Japan needed

4. Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1904–5), trans. Talcott Parsons (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958), 176–77.

5. F. A. Hayek, *The Road to Serfdom* (1944; reprint, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972), 12–13.

> top-level planning and protection to achieve optimum economic growth. This bureaucratic capitalism is incomprehensible without understanding how victor and vanquished embraced Japan's defeat together.[6]

Finally, here is David Bevington arguing that Shakespeare's plays have a visual dimension that reinforces their dialogue and contributes powerfully to their meaning:

> Shakespeare's texts demand visual realization. Ascents and descents, kneeling, ceremonial processions, joinings of hands, and the like are not only omnipresent but function as signs of hierarchical relationship, personal obligation, communal celebration, and a host of other meaningful qualities. Clothing betokens social rank or, conversely, a holiday inversion of it. Gestures often occupy the central moment of a scene or signal the reversal of dramatic action. My aim has been to study this unspoken language of the theater, and to see how Shakespeare regards both its capacity and its limitations.[7]

Bevington's thesis statement appears early—in the preface—but it really begins with the title of his book, *Action Is Eloquence: Shakespeare's Language of Gesture.* Dower's title, *Embracing Defeat,* captures his thesis, too, and Hayek's *Road to Serfdom* anticipates his argument. That's worth thinking about when you choose your own title. A great title does more than mark off your subject matter. It indicates your take on it. Your title effectively becomes the opening line of your thesis statement.

> ***Tip:*** **The best paper titles do more than indicate the subject matter. They indicate your perspective on it.**

WHAT GOOD THESIS STATEMENTS HAVE IN COMMON

The thesis statements shown here are vastly different in their subject matter. Yet all of them are concise, forceful, and original. As they stand,

---

6. John W. Dower, *Embracing Defeat: Japan in the Wake of World War II* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1999), 558.

7. David Bevington, *Action Is Eloquence: Shakespeare's Language of Gesture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), viii.

however, they are little more than assertions. The authors spend most of their books developing these arguments, supporting them, defending them against likely objections, and showing their full implications. In the process, they build great books around interesting arguments.

In each case, the thesis statement shows that the project is coherent, that its multiple strands are bound together by a single aim. This aim, stated in the argument, is the focal point of the entire work.

That is exactly what you want to accomplish in your own thesis statement. In the first few months of thesis research, you'll take aim. As you move forward with your research and writing, you will adjust your sights. Revising your thesis statement is not a concession. It's learning. Finally, you will draw conclusions and try to show how your argument hits the bull's-eye.

> ***Tip:*** **Don't worry if your argument changes during your research project. That's learning!**

REVISING YOUR THESIS STATEMENT

It is common to revise a thesis argument as research goes forward. Revisions like this are welcome improvements. They don't mislead the reader unless you say (wrongly) that you have tested a proposition when you actually figured it out afterward, based on evidence revealed as you tested a different proposition.

Research 101 says *you cannot use the same evidence to generate a proposition and test it.* That's circular. But it's perfectly kosher to look at your evidence and revise your proposition or generate a new one. The revised proposition, you explain, fits the existing evidence but still needs to be tested on other evidence—perhaps another case or a different database. That's learning, too.

> ***Tip:*** **Don't claim to have tested a proposition on evidence if you didn't, if what you really did was infer the proposition from the evidence you gathered.**

You should consider revising the thesis statement in several ways as you work on the project. One, which we've just mentioned, is in response to

testing and evaluation. If some predictions are wrong, then you need to take that into account and modify the argument. Having done that, test the revised predictions against *different* evidence (or at least say it needs to be done—by next year's seniors).

You may also discover that your argument is vague or cannot be evaluated in some circumstances. This problem may not be apparent until you've conducted some research, but, having discovered it, you should fix it. That means sharpening and clarifying the argument.

Another possibility is that your original argument is too broad. Your research may reveal it applies perfectly well to the United States but not to Canada, or vice versa. If your thesis statement incorrectly says it should apply to both countries, or perhaps to all democracies, then you need to delimit it. Put a fence around your argument, saying where it applies and where it doesn't. Don't do that in an arbitrary or ad hoc way. Specify the limits in clear, general terms, if possible—the same way you stated the thesis itself.

Similar problems can arise when you explore literary materials or historical documents. As you develop your analysis or narrative, you may discover that it no longer corresponds to your original argument. That's not uncommon as you move deeper into research and writing. But something's gotta give. Your broader argument should find support in the detailed analysis. Assuming you are more confident about the details (as most students are), then it's time to rework the thesis argument so it fits snugly.

Except for the comments about testing predictions, these observations apply to the humanities as well as the social sciences. Your analysis of Wordsworth may suggest some insights into his fellow Lake Poets and possibly into all Romantic literature. You may think this broad application is a promising possibility, although nothing more than a possibility at this stage. Or perhaps you are certain the comments apply only to Wordsworth or, even more narrowly, to only a few of his poems. Say that. Tell your readers how widely your analysis applies and what its limits are.

Beyond exploring these limits, review your work to make sure the argument corresponds to the detailed research. If gaps remain, consider how best to explain them and discuss these issues with your adviser.

Sharpening and refining your argument like this not only improves your paper; it improves your understanding. It's a learning experience well beyond most course work.

CAN YOU PASS THE "ELEVATOR TEST"?

How do you know when you have finally developed a clear-cut argument to call your own? Take the elevator test. As you start to ascend from the lobby, a visiting professor turns to you and says: "So, I see you are writing a thesis. What's it about?" First, take off your headphones. Then describe your subject and your basic slant on it. If you can explain both in a straightforward, accessible way, you pass with flying colors. If you can do it before you reach the fourth floor, you are well on your way to a great thesis.

Tip: Once you have a clear, sharp argument, you should be able to state it in a few sentences. In fact, it should be brief enough to explain on an elevator ride. That's a great test, unless the elevator is in the Empire State Building.

CHECKLIST: THESIS ARGUMENT

- Write a preliminary version of your main argument or "thesis statement" after you have completed background readings.
- Revise this argument as you continue researching and writing.
- Discuss your argument periodically with your adviser.
- Work toward a briefer, sharper statement of your argument (the elevator test).