

When to Begin Writing a Thesis

A thesis statement is a one-sentence summary of a paper's argument. It is a common misconception that the thesis is the “starting point” when writing a paper. In rare cases, we may have a clear (hypo)thesis or theory already when we get an assignment. If so, we can start researching and drafting to test the thesis's strength. More often, however, the thesis statement is crafted in the middle of the paper-writing process.

Where to Start Instead of Writing a Thesis

The best way to start the process of writing a thesis is to start writing anything *but* the thesis. Rather than trying to nail down the paper's exact argument from the get-go, we can freewrite in response to one or more of the prompts below:

- What questions do I have about the class readings, discussions, or other materials? What am I stuck on? What don't I yet know about the class's topic?
- What do I want to learn? What aspect of the course topic do I want to know more about? Or, what new perspective(s) do I want to apply to the topic?
- What intriguing connections am I forming between disparate ideas?
- How are my personal research interests connected to the class materials?
- How is my previous work/thinking extended by my current learning? What new insights have I had? How does new knowledge complicate earlier models of understanding?

There are several benefits to starting with freewriting:

1. By giving ourselves something low-stakes to write about, we gain momentum; we already have words on the page, and the hurdle of *starting* is already cleared.
2. Instead of expecting ourselves to have a perfect idea at the outset, we can explore how our minds interact with course content and identify what holds our interest. A paper rooted in genuine interest is far easier to write than a paper that's trying to sound “smart” or “correct.”
3. Freewriting can generate research questions, tentative theses, or novel connections that can become foundations for later versions of the paper. Perhaps some or all of your freewriting will turn into a section or paragraph in your essay!

Writing through the mass of thoughts swarming in our heads helps specify our interests. But, if we're still struggling to get specific at this point, talking our ideas through with another person can be beneficial. Another set of eyes might notice patterns that we can't see from our up-close perspective.

In all, rather than trying to pull an argument or paper idea out of thin air, investigating our thinking and interests helps locate personal stakes and questions that can guide the rest of our writing process.

Another Note on Freewriting

Don't be afraid to sit down and start blathering onto the page—that is how this guide began. This very sentence was part of a much different document that was unorganized and undirected. What comes before and after it has changed drastically since it was written. Freewriting is about leaning into the word-vomit, not worrying about whether it's "good."

If we accept that most of our freewriting won't appear in the final version of our paper, we can delete a few hundred words and start over with the one good sentence we wrote that crystallizes our point.

How to Write a Working Thesis, Pt. 1: Distillation

Once we've carved out some areas of interest for our paper, we need to narrow things down and move toward a "working thesis." A working thesis is a placeholder; there's still a lot of writing to do, and our working thesis will change as our thinking changes. Remember, writing is more about developing and molding our thoughts than about conjuring "intelligent" thoughts from our brains.

To start, let's say we have one good sentence—or even a whole decent paragraph—that really speaks to our interest in a paper topic. Our one good sentence may not be a thesis. It may be one point in our overall argument, or it may be a specific question that we can research in order to develop our thesis. The goal, now, is to figure out what we'll need to expand upon that fragment:

- What ideas have I combined in my one good paragraph/sentence? How can I break the sentence down to understand its component parts?
- What kinds of research would be required to expand upon my paragraph/sentence? Do I need to build support for some provisional

conclusions? Or do I need to explore additional lines of argument that will work toward formulating conclusions?

{An essay's thesis and structure are closely linked; in fact, the Greek *θέσις* (thésis) can be translated as arrangement—an arrangement of ideas. Essay structure is covered in another guide, but for now, we can ask: “Based on my paragraph/sentence, what sections will I want to write and how will they work together?”}

How to Write a Working Thesis, Pt. 2: Formulation

Now that we have a clearer idea of our paper's general shape, we can craft a working thesis that encapsulates our overall argument. A thesis can be thought to have three components:

1. The **thesis claim** (what) is the core of our thesis statement; it is our argument, our unique perspective that we seek to convince our readers of. Every thesis statement must have a **claim**.
2. The *significance* (why) tells our readers why our claim matters—what use it is for our field of study and how it can help us think and act differently and more knowledgeably based on our insights.
3. The method (how) is the evidence we'll use to argue our claim: a brief summary of the major theories, data, and/or experiences we'll draw upon.

Not all thesis statements need to have all three components, but all theses must make a **claim**. The three templates below represent a few among endless possibilities. They are divided into three parts to separate the **claim**, *significance*, and method. Try using one to formulate a working thesis:

Although _____, Despite _____, By considering _____,
I claim _____, through _____, **I will show that** _____,
because _____. **it is clear** _____. *for the sake of* _____.

The thesis is something we continue working on throughout the writing process. As we continue drafting, it will undoubtedly change. But now, we have a start and can forge on with writing our essay!