Writing Workshop - Starting an Essay, Thesis Statements
English 105

**Outlining your Paper**
A working outline can suggest areas in which your paper needs additional work or supporting details to bolster main ideas or, on the other hand, areas which have too much emphasis and need to be pruned down to avoid an imbalance. The outline helps you to see how ideas are related and where connections or transitions are necessary between sections of your paper. Furthermore, the outline will help you visualize how ideas fit within the thesis statement that is taking shape in your mind. Remember that your outline is only a tentative skeleton to hang ideas on; limbs can be lopped off or added as the writing proceeds.
There is no “right” way to outline. However, there are a few steps you might follow to increase the efficiency of the process.

1. **Read and think.** Re-read the material with your topic in mind. Underline, highlight, and write marginal notes in the text.

2. **Cluster.** Don’t censor yourself. As you consider your topic, write down any and all words and phrases that come to mind. This is a totally random and subjective process. Do *your* thing here. The important thing at this point is to be generating *stuff*.

3. **Working list.** Use the “cluster” to begin editing and organizing data. Make connections between ideas. Jot down key points and sub-points you may want to make. Give this thing some shape. It’s OK if your points and sub-points are questions not statements. The important thing is to have key points (these might be incorporated into a thesis statement at some point) and sub-points (supporting the key points).

4. **Informal outline.** Keep it informal. You don’t need Roman numerals or complete sentences. Develop a tentative thesis statement (it can be very sloppy at this point), use it as a roadmap, and organize your paper accordingly.

**Five Ways of Looking At a Thesis**

1. **A thesis says something a little strange.**

*A: By telling the story of Westley and Buttercup's triumph over evil, The Princess Bride affirms the power of true love.*

*B: Although the main plot of The Princess Bride rests on the natural power of true love, an examination of the way that fighting sticks (baseball bats, tree branches, and swords) link the frame story to the romance plot suggests that the grandson is being trained in true love, that it is not natural but socialized.*

Both of these statements are perfectly correct. Only the second one says something weird. Weird is good. Sentence A encourages the paper to produce precisely the evidence that everybody always talks about in *The Princess Bride*; sentence B ensures that the paper will talk about something new.

*Frankenstein warns society against taking science too far. The creature starts out good and becomes bad because of society.*

Yup. How can you make those things unusual? Many good papers start by pointing out something that seems not to make sense and then making sense of it.

2.    **A thesis creates an argument that builds from one point to the next.**

*A: The Rules and Jane Austen's Northanger Abbey both tell women how to act.*

*B: By looking at The Rules, a modern conduct book for women, we can see how Jane Austen's Northanger Abbey is itself like a conduct book, questioning the rules for social success in her society and offering a new model.*

This applies mostly to comparison/contrast papers. If the components of your argument can be rearranged without changing the thesis, your thesis has a problem.

3.    **A thesis fits comfortably into the     Magic Thesis Sentence (MTS).**

The MTS:

By looking at \_\_\_\_\_, we can see \_\_\_\_\_, which most readers don't see. This is important because \_\_\_\_\_.

Try it out with the above examples. Important to complicate and rearrange once have the main components.

4.    **A thesis says something about the text(s) you discuss *exclusively.***

--Needs to be a focused, specific argument.

*A: By telling the story of Westley and Buttercup's triumph over evil, The Princess Bride affirms the power of true love.*

*B: Although the main plot of The Princess Bride rests on the natural power of true love, an examination of the way that fighting sticks (baseball bats, tree branches, and swords) link the frame story to the romance plot suggests that the grandson is being trained in true love, that it is not natural but socialized.*

Try substituting other works:
*A: By telling the story of Darcy and Elizabeth's triumph over evil, Pride and Prejudice affirms the power of true love.*
Sure. Bad sign.

*B: Although the main plot of Pride and Prejudice rests on the natural power of true love, an examination of the way that fighting sticks (baseball bats, tree branches, and swords) link the frame story to the romance plot suggests that the grandson is being trained in true love, that it is not natural but socialized.*
Um, nope. Good sign.

5.    **A thesis makes a lot of information irrelevant.**

**--Need to be able to use detailed, focused evidence from the text to support your claim.**

*A: By telling the story of Westley and Buttercup's triumph over evil, The Princess Bride affirms the power of true love.*

A plot summary of *The Princess Bride* would support this thesis. Bad sign. A strong thesis excludes most of the text in order to make a specific claim.

*B: Although the main plot of The Princess Bride rests on the natural power of true love, an examination of the way that fighting sticks (baseball bats, tree branches, and swords) link the frame story to the romance plot suggests that the grandson is being trained in true love, that it is not natural but socialized.*

This excludes most of the text. Good sign. Your reader knows precisely which parts of it you'll be talking about and why.

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**Questions to help you gauge the strength of your thesis:**

1. (Yes or No) Is your thesis debatable—could reasonable people disagree with it?

2. (Yes or No) Is your position clearly stated? Can readers tell where you stand?

3. (Yes or No) Can you support your thesis adequately, using textual evidence from the texts and you are analyzing?

 **Thesis Worksheet**

by Laura Heffernan

(adapted from Michael Barsanti's "Writing a Thesis" and Erik Simpson's "Five Ways of Looking at a Thesis")

Your thesis statement **SHOULD**:
1.  rule out most of the material of a text, focusing tight enough to make a specific claim.
2.  be a little strange.  In other words, it should assert something that seems wrong or odd to begin.  You will then make sense of it as you move through the paper.
3.  be able to fit into this structure:
By looking at \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_, we can see \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_, which most readers don't see; this is important because \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_.

Your thesis **SHOULD NOT**:
1.  Make a claim that can be applied to other texts.  If you can insert the title of another essay, novel or film in your thesis and it is still true, your thesis is too general.
2.  Invoke or rephrase a cliché, such as "a picture is worth a thousand words"; "life is like a box of chocolates".
3.  Make any claim about Society, The History of Mankind, People Since the Beginning of Time, All the People of the World, Everyone Who Ever Lived, etc.
4.  Express judgments about the authors/ideas in the texts that are completely tangential to the 'meat' of the text (in other words, be Mother Teresa or Angry Sports Fan, but work thoughtfully with what's in front of you.)
Below, write your own versions of BAD THESIS STATEMENTS numbers 1, 2, 3, & 4 to get them completely out of your system.  Use your tentative ideas for your essay as your guide.

1.
2.
3.
4.

Finally, write a GOOD THESIS STATEMENT, or refine the one you already have: