Example 1: Crafting an Arguable Thesis – Harvard University

Now, consider the following advice from the Harvard Writing Center:

Developing A Thesis

Think of yourself as a member of a jury, listening to a lawyer who is presenting an opening argument. You'll want to know very soon whether the lawyer believes the accused to be guilty or not guilty, and how the lawyer plans to convince you. Readers of academic essays are like jury members: before they have read too far, they want to know what the essay argues as well as how the writer plans to make the argument. After reading your thesis statement, the reader should think, "This essay is going to try to convince me of something. I'm not convinced yet, but I'm interested to see how I might be."

An effective thesis cannot be answered with a simple "yes" or "no." A thesis is not a topic; nor is it a fact; nor is it an opinion. "Reasons for the fall of communism" is a topic. "Communism collapsed in Eastern Europe" is a fact known by educated people. "The fall of communism is the best thing that ever happened in Europe" is an opinion. (Superlatives like "the best" almost always lead to trouble. It's impossible to weigh every "thing" that ever happened in Europe. And what about the fall of Hitler? Couldn't that be "the best thing"?)

A good thesis has two parts. It should tell what you plan to argue, and it should "telegraph" how you plan to argue—that is, what particular support for your claim is going where in your essay.

Steps in Constructing a Thesis

First, analyze your primary sources. Look for tension, interest, ambiguity, controversy, and/or complication. Does the author contradict himself or herself? Is a point made and later reversed? What are the deeper implications of the author's argument? Figuring out the why to one or more of these questions, or to related questions, will put you on the path to developing a working thesis. (Without the why, you probably have only come up with an observation—that there are, for instance, many different metaphors in such-and-such a poem—which is not a thesis.)

Once you have a working thesis, write it down. There is nothing as frustrating as hitting on a great idea for a thesis, then forgetting it when you lose concentration. And by writing down your thesis you will be forced to think of it clearly, logically, and concisely. You probably will not be able to write out a final-draft version of your thesis the first time you try, but you'll get yourself on the right track by writing down what you have.

Keep your thesis prominent in your introduction. A good, standard place for your thesis statement is at the end of an introductory paragraph, especially in shorter (5-15 page) essays. Readers are used to finding theses there, so they automatically pay more attention when they read the last sentence of your introduction. Although this is not required in all academic essays, it is a good rule of thumb.

Anticipate the counter-arguments. Once you have a working thesis, you should think about what might be said against it. This will help you to refine your thesis, and it will also make you think of the
arguments that you'll need to refute later on in your essay. (Every argument has a counter-argument. If yours doesn't, then it's not an argument—it may be a fact, or an opinion, but it is not an argument.)

*Michael Dukakis lost the 1988 presidential election because he failed to campaign vigorously after the Democratic National Convention.*

This statement is on its way to being a thesis. However, it is too easy to imagine possible counter-arguments. For example, a political observer might believe that Dukakis lost because he suffered from a "soft-on-crime" image. If you complicate your thesis by anticipating the counter-argument, you'll strengthen your argument, as shown in the sentence below.

*While Dukakis' "soft-on-crime" image hurt his chances in the 1988 election, his failure to campaign vigorously after the Democratic National Convention bore a greater responsibility for his defeat.*

**Some Caveats and Some Examples**

**A thesis is never a question.** Readers of academic essays expect to have questions discussed, explored, or even answered. A question ("Why did communism collapse in Eastern Europe?") is not an argument, and without an argument, a thesis is dead in the water.

**A thesis is never a list.** "For political, economic, social and cultural reasons, communism collapsed in Eastern Europe" does a good job of "telegraphing" the reader what to expect in the essay—a section about political reasons, a section about economic reasons, a section about social reasons, and a section about cultural reasons. However, political, economic, social and cultural reasons are pretty much the only possible reasons why communism could collapse. This sentence lacks tension and doesn't advance an argument. Everyone knows that politics, economics, and culture are important.

**A thesis should never be vague, combative or confrontational.** An ineffective thesis would be, "Communism collapsed in Eastern Europe because communism is evil." This is hard to argue (evil from whose perspective? what does evil mean?) Broad moral judgments in a thesis are problematic unless the basis and criteria of such judgments are clearly established and defended. For that reason, it is preferable to avoid statements that sound like moral commonplaces or platitudes. Such moral sentiments may be, and often are, correct; but to establish their rational basis makes the scope of the thesis too broad and therefore the thesis itself harder to defend.

**An effective thesis has a definable, arguable claim.** "While cultural forces contributed to the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe, the disintegration of economies played the key role in driving its decline" is an effective thesis sentence that "telegraphs," so that the reader expects the essay to have a section about cultural forces and another about the disintegration of economies. This thesis makes a definite, arguable claim: that the disintegration of economies played a more important role than cultural forces in defeating communism in Eastern Europe. The reader would react to this statement by thinking, "Perhaps what the author says is true, but I am not convinced. I want to read further to see how the author argues this claim."

**A thesis should be as clear and specific as possible.** Avoid overused, general terms and abstractions. For example, "Communism collapsed in Eastern Europe because of the ruling elite's inability to address the economic concerns of the people" is more powerful than "Communism collapsed due to societal
discontent."

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I. WHAT IS A THESIS?

What is a thesis? The thesis is the controlling idea around which you construct the rest of your paper. In a history paper, the thesis generally explains why or how something happened. Every word of your paper should support your thesis. Information you do not directly relate to your thesis will appear irrelevant. This means, of course, that in a paper with a weak or no thesis, much of the paper will appear to be irrelevant and unguided.

How do I present the thesis? The thesis should be contained in a single sentence that is concise and grammatically correct. This is usually the last sentence of the first paragraph. More than one sentence may be necessary to establish the thesis. The remainder of the introductory paragraph should draw the reader's attention to the problem the thesis confronts, and define key terms that appear in the thesis.

The thesis is a scholarly argument. Most writing attempts to convince the reader of something. Even a poetic description of a rock is an attempt to convince the reader that the rock appears a certain way. A history paper takes a stand on a historical issue or problem, and attempts to develop a coherent and persuasive line of thought intended to convince the reader of the validity of that stand. Your thesis is the concise statement of your argument.

II. THE THESIS QUESTION

A good thesis derives from a good question. Since the thesis is your conclusion to a scholarly argument, there must be a clear question at stake. A thesis which does not answer a question, or answers a simple or obvious question, is not a thesis. You need to ask thoughtful questions of your topic and primary source material to develop a good thesis. The best theses are good precisely because the questions they answer are significant, complex, and original.

What does a good thesis question look like? There are many sources for questions which lead to a good thesis, but all seem to pose a novel approach to their subject. A good thesis question may result from your curious observations of primary source material, as in "During World War II, why did American soldiers seem to treat Japanese prisoners-of-war more brutally than German prisoners-of-war?" Or, good thesis questions may challenge accepted wisdom, as in "Many people assume that Jackson's Indian policy had nothing to do with his domestic politics; are they right?" Finally, a good thesis question may complicate a seemingly clear-cut topic, as in "Puritans expropriated Indians' land for wealth, but were psychological factors involved as well?"

III. CONSTRUCTING A THESIS

How do I develop a good thesis? Here is an example of how you might arrive at a strong thesis.

(1) Start with a topic, such as discrimination against Japanese Americans during World War II. (Note that this is a very general area of interest. At this stage, it is utterly unguided. You cannot write a paper on this topic, because you have no path into the material.)
(2) Develop a question around it, as in "why did government officials allow discrimination against Japanese Americans?" (You now have a question that helps you probe your topic; your efforts have a direction, which is answering the question you have posed for yourself. Note that there are a great many questions which you might ask of your general topic. You should expect in the course of your research to consider many such possibilities. Which ones are the most interesting? Which ones are possible given the constraints of the assignment?)

(3) Develop a unique perspective on your question which answers it: Government officials allowed discrimination against Japanese Americans not because it was in the nation's interest, but because it provided a concrete enemy for people to focus on. (This is a thesis statement. You have answered the question you posed, and done so with a rather concrete and specific statement. Your answer offers a novel and thoughtful way of thinking about the material. Once the terms of the thesis are clarified [what was the "national interest"; what was the meaning and value of having "a concrete enemy for people to focus on"?], you are on your way to a solid paper.)

Constructing a tentative thesis (hypothesis): Here is a somewhat formulaic approach to constructing a tentative thesis.

(1) A concessive clause ("although such and such"). If you do not concede something, you will appear strident and unreasonable. By conceding something, your point will stand out, for you will have contrasted it with an opposing position.

(2) The main clause. This is the heart of your argument -- the thing you will prove. The subject of the main clause should be the subject of the paper. Do not present it in the form of "I will show" or "I hope to prove."

(3) A "because" clause. This will force you to summarize support for your thesis as concisely as possible.

Example: Although the Scopes Trial was a legal farce, it reflected deep ambivalence in American thinking, because so many conflicting attitudes met headlong in Dayton, Tennessee. (Not a great thesis, but a good start. What were those conflicting attitudes? What was the key to their conflict? This thesis should be re-visited later with these questions in mind.)

Another approach to thesis construction: Here is another exercise that might help you develop your thesis. On a separate sheet of paper, complete the following sentences:

(1) Dear Reader: I want to convince you that. . . . [This is a hypothesis]

(2) The main reasons why you should believe me are that. . . . [This is a summary of your evidence and logic.]

(3) You should care about my thesis because. . . . [This provides the seeds of your conclusion, and checks the significance of your thesis.]

Refining the thesis: A good thesis does not spring to life from nothing. A good thesis is the product of a discussion you have about your source material and its meaning. Here is what that process might look like:
(1) Start with a question about your source material, as explained above.

*How did African-American women fare after slavery ended?*

(2) Create a hypothesis, that is, a tentative answer to the question. I suggest using the formula above.

*Although freedom made life better in general for the slaves, African-American women fared worse than African-American men under freedom, because society sought to impose sexist notions of gender roles on emancipated black families.*

(3) Then, considering the contents of your primary sources, ask these questions: Is my hypothesis really true? What evidence at my disposal makes it false? How can I modify my hypothesis to make it true?

For instance, you may have some source information that suggests black women were beaten by their husbands when free, but you might also have some that suggests their husbands protected them from whites and kept them from working long hard hours in the fields. Perhaps it was only in the realm of *relative equality within the family* that women lost out in freedom.

(4) Develop a new, more complex hypothesis by modifying the old one. There usually is no need to start from scratch; simply alter what you started with.

*Although freedom made life better in general for African-American women, freedwomen may have lost some of the power they had held in the family under slavery, because freedom subjected them to the patriarchal domination of a sexist society.*

**More suggestions for developing a good thesis:**

Developing a good thesis is usually the most difficult part of writing a paper; do not expect it to come easily.

After developing a hypothesis, read through it again, searching for vague words and phrases that "let you off the hook," or permit you to not make strong arguments. Underline such phrases, and re-word them to be more specific. In every un-refined thesis, there is a word or phrase which remains unclear or unexplained. Find it and "unpack" it in your introductory paragraph.

**You should start thinking about possible theses from the very start of your paper preparation, but you need to examine your primary sources before you can develop a strong thesis.** It is impossible to develop a good thesis without having begun to analyze the primary sources which supply your evidence. How can you know what is even possible to argue if you haven't looked closely at your data?

In a history paper, you must state your conclusion (thesis) at the outset. But this does not mean you have to write it that way. Often, you will not know exactly how you will make that complex thesis until you have gotten deeply into the material. Start your draft with a tentative thesis paragraph (perhaps constructed using the formula above). Once you have written a draft of the paper, go back and re-write the thesis paragraph -- you'll have a much better sense of what you just argued, and you'll come up with a better thesis. Then go back over the body and see if it supports this complex thesis. Good writing is a
process of continually evaluating your work this way -- of constantly asking yourself if your evidence and analysis supports your thesis. Remember, the thesis is not the starting point of your exploration, but the result of it.

**What does a bad thesis look like?** Here are some examples.

The evolution trial of 1925 was made a farce and a comedy by the circumstances surrounding the trial. Behind this facade lay issues that were deeply disturbing to the Americans of the 1920s. By an examination of the Scopes Trial, some of these issues can begin to be perceived and analyzed and perhaps they can reveal a better understanding of the decade. (There is no thesis here. The last sentence seems to be a thesis, but actually speaks to the way the paper will proceed rather than to its conclusion. **It does not explain why or how something happened.**)

Henry David Thoreau, the author of *Walden*, and Theodore Parker, the unitarian minister and abolitionist, were two of the greatest minds of the antebellum period. The purpose of this paper is to examine means of resistance through a comparison of the philosophies of Thoreau and Parker. (This is a statement of purpose and method, but does not begin to offer a thesis. What is the question or problem? **Comparison is a method of inquiry that leads to a thesis, not a thesis itself.**)

As slaves, African Americans were given little or no rights as families. Husbands and wives were parted, and children were separated from their mothers by masters who had no qualms about selling them. Even those families kept intact were by no means protected from the hardships of slavery. Through emancipation came new opportunities and problems for African American families. (This is a little closer, but still problematic. It does assert something [emancipation brought “new opportunities and problems”] about its subject [African American families]. Yet this assertion is vague; it lacks focus and direction. More questions need to be asked: What kind of opportunities and problems did emancipation present? Which [opportunities or problems] were more important to the shaping of post-emancipation life? In short, **the assertion made here is neither sufficiently adventurous nor specific to qualify as a good thesis.**)

http://www.bowdoin.edu/writing-guides/thesis.htm