

THESIS STATEMENTS¹

A specific thesis is essential to your paper. Writing a thesis ahead of time helps you to clarify your ideas about the topic before you begin to support your *argument*. Though your thesis may change as your paper develops, it is important to begin the process of writing with a clear *argument* in mind.

An effective thesis will indicate the subject of your *argument* and the material you will offer as proof of your claim. It serves three functions:

1. identifies a limited subject & therefore provides a test for what material should go into your paper;
2. it focuses the reader's attention on the specific features of the subject that you will discuss;
3. it makes clear your attitude (or, the attitude you are assuming for the purpose of this paper) toward the subject.²

HOW TO WRITE A THESIS

In writing the thesis, you will be attempting to answer several questions: 1) **what** is your topic, argument, idea, etc; 2) **how** is there evidence in the text, how are you going to argue it, etc.; and 3) **why** is it important, why have you called attention to it, why is it there, etc. You need to tell the reader: what you will write about, what your claim (argument) about this topic is, how you will prove it, how you know this claim to be 'true' or evident, and why is it important, and why I should care about it. Examples:

1. In fashioning a system of characters who are able to sense Belinda's hidden desires (**how**), Alexander Pope creates a means of looking at rape (**what**) as being justified by the vanity and inconstancy of women (**why**).
2. By describing Oroonoko's beauty in terms of whiteness (**how**), Aphra Behn enables an all-white audience to identify with this slave (**what**) in an effort to critique the colonial project (**why**).
3. Neglected, unloved and misled by her own family, Anne Elliot's self-realization (**what**) is achieved through the satisfaction of the drive toward joining a better family (**how**), and thereby locating a viable means of coping with her own (**why**).

REMEMBERING YOUR THESIS & ORGANIZING YOUR PAPER

HOW: Use the "how" part of your thesis to organize your paper and develop points in your argument. Your paper will show how an effect is created, how a theme is handled, how meaning emerges. You must support these "how" assertions with references to the text. Examples:

¹ The material in this handout has its source, with modification, from a handout available at CLAS.

² Fear, David and Gerald Schiffhorst, the Short English Handbook/3.

- Thesis 1. In each paragraph, discuss an example of how the sylphs (with their ability to sense Belinda's desire) show that the rape is justified (that she 'wanted it').
- Thesis 2. In each paragraph, examine one way in which Oroonoko is described in terms of white beauty, and how this is particularly molded to the narrator's purpose.
- Thesis 3. In each paragraph, analyze one example which shows Anne Elliot taking a step in her search for a better family (one thing which enables this process).

WHY: To formulate a conclusion, consider the "why" part of your thesis. By doing this, you will not just restate what comes before. You need to think about: why you have chosen this subject; what social, psychological, moral, or other cultural truth your paper builds toward; and what you want your readers to learn from reading your paper. Examples:

- Thesis 1. Why does Pope hope to justify rape? What is the motive in promoting such a discourse? Why doesn't he just say directly that women are too vain and inconstant?
- Thesis 2: Why is the standard of beauty in the text white? Why not present Oroonoko as beautiful in terms of racial difference? Why must the colonial project be critiqued by a reference to sameness?
- Thesis 3: Why must Anne Elliot create an ideal family? Why is her own not sufficient? What societal role is Anne lacking a role model around whom to mold her identity?

BEFORE YOU TURN IN YOUR PAPER

If you follow the what, how and why method of writing a thesis, you should have less trouble in organizing your paper and making sure you assert and argument, and support it with the text. Sometimes, the shape of our arguments changes as we write the paper. Because of this, you need to do the following things before you turn in your paper:

Look at your thesis again. Where is it placed? Will it be clear to the reader what you are arguing?

Is your thesis obvious? Are you arguing that the sky is blue? Have you remembered to say how and why?

Check the last paragraph of your paper. Are the last few sentences in keeping with what you were originally arguing? If not, is there a better statement of your thesis? If so, move it to the beginning of your paper (where your thesis should be).

GOOD LUCK!