

1- **A good “thesis statement” presents the reader with the central “argument” (an original claim, or proposition) of your essay.**

The “**argument**” of the essay is *not* a general topic area, a description of a book, or a summary of a plot. An argument interprets something specific about what a text means and how it creates this meaning. An argument also explains to the reader why this interpretation matters. An argument can judge, evaluate, appreciate, and criticize in the course of interpretation. In other words, an argument offers your reader a way of understanding something *and* explains the consequences of this understanding. An argument should *not* be obvious—it should advance a claim that readers might disagree with, or, might not expect.

The “**thesis statement**” is a succinct summary of your essay’s argument. The thesis statement usually (but not always) appears as the last sentence of your introduction. It states your main point, the way you will be making your point through interpretation in the body of your essay, and promises to deliver impact of your main point.

Here is a basic template for a thesis statement: “By considering \_\_\_\_\_, we can see that \_\_\_\_\_. This is important because \_\_\_\_\_.”

2- **A good thesis focuses attention on something specific about the text—“something” related to both *what* the text is communicating (as you understand it) and to *how* the text (the author) is communicating its message.**

A good argument and thesis considers both the **content** (the message) of the text and the **style** (the craftwork) of the text as the author has written it. The *style* includes characteristics related to how the author crafts the text. Discovering the relationship between content and style comes out of “close-reading”:

-**consideration of the plot**—the action of the story and how its parts add up to create a sense of sequence, of progress, of chronological passage of time (or how the parts *do not* do this, and instead break or interrupt the flow of a story or sense of time)

-**consideration of setting (place and time)**: where and when events take place

-**consideration of characters**: who are the agents of action (the heroes or protagonists); who are the villains (the antagonists); who are the side characters and how do they relate to the main characters?

-**metaphors and symbols**: are there patterns of metaphors that run through the text (extended metaphors?); are there strange or curious metaphors that seem out of place?

-**allegories**: does the narrative have a parallel story (or stories) that you want to consider

-**narrative structure**: consider how the author relates to the narrative to the reader. Is this a “first-person” narrator (“I”) who addresses the reader directly as “you”? Is this a “third-person” narrator that describes the narrative world to you from the outside.

-**narrative reliability**: can you trust how the narrator tells the story? If the narrator is using the first-person (“I”) you might consider if the limits of your trust—or the ways the narrator can only understand the world as they experience it. If the narrator is a “third-person,” consider how much the narrator knows about the world they describe: can the narrator get inside the mind of the characters? Can you trust the narrator? How far or why not?

**-Syntax and grammatical structure:** What is the writing style like? Is it clear? Is it wordy with complicated punctuation (and long sentences)? Does the writing break grammatical rules—or formally adhere to all the rules? What effect does this have on how you read the text?

**-Diction and word choice:** Does the author use simple language or use uncommon words that the reader might need to look up in a dictionary? What kind of impression does the author create in representing how characters express their observation to others or think about their experience? Does the author use “dialect”—representing the sound of particular characters’ speech in ways that involve misspellings or contractions? What effect does this have—does it imply hierarchies of respectability or authority?

-As you consider syntax and diction, **open your ears to tone**—the feeling that the author creates in how the narrator communicates or in how characters speak to one another (in dialogue or conversation). Is this tone relaxed, nervous, angry, happy, cool, or emotionally charged in some way? Attention to tone can also suggest ambiguity and uncertainty, among characters or between the narrator and the reader. What does such ambiguity mean? Does it introduce *irony*—when the author/narrator/character means the opposite of what they are actually saying.

**-On irony:** in telling a story, the author can “say one thing but mean the opposite” in many different ways. For example, maybe a novel has a character that interprets their world in ways that the readers understands is false or deluded; maybe the author creates a scene in which a character misunderstands the situation but the readers do understand the situation (this is *dramatic irony*)

**-Consider the *genre* or kind / category of literature that you are reading.** This matters to what authors and readers expect as a style of its communication. Examples of “genre” move across “fiction” and “non-fiction” and include: ballads, poetry, epics, sermons, captivity narratives, romances, novels, slave narratives, autobiographies, slave narratives, and more. Consider authors follow (and break) rules of genre. Considerations of “genre” also relate to consideration of “media”—that is, different forms of expression ranging across printed literature, performance as drama in the theater, to film, television, and the internet.

**-The paratext:** these are features that present the central text or that complement it, such as: the title page, the appendix, footnotes, epigraphs, prefaces and introductions, illustrations or special visual designs inserted by publishers

Please know that this is not a checklist of what you must write about. (There are many more possibilities too!) It is not possible to fit all of these considerations into one essay—but in the early stages of brainstorming analysis, coming up with an opinion, constructing an argument, and formulating a thesis, it is helpful to shift between these elements of style.

### 3- **A good thesis defines its key term or key terms**

As you think of an argument and create a thesis for it, keep a look out for your key term and tell your reader how you are defining it. You might made the definition of your “key term” part of your argument and thesis—telling your reader that your essay will help develop and to explain a better definition and understanding of this term.

### 4- **In the body of your essay: remember that plot summary or description of events, characters, or places should lead to an act of interpretation.**

A short summary of the plot or a character helps orient the reader. But remember that the way in which you summarize is implicitly part of your interpretation. When you tell your reader “what

happened” in the plot, or describe for your reader a character, a place, or a scene, you are framing an interpretation, offering an understanding of the events—please tell your reader what your summary implies for your interpretation / argument.

**5- In the body of your essay: selecting quotes and/or choosing key phrases is an act of interpretation**

Remember that when you cite a passage or quote a phrase from the text, it is a powerful way to direct your reader’s attention. Make the most out of your selection of quotes—choose a few important ones (instead of a big number that you do not analyze or interpret). Another tip: maybe your “key term” (#3, above) emerges from the text itself—this is a good way to tie your thesis to the text in a direct way that opens to your more general interpretation.

**6- Your argument and thesis can be creative, communicating to your reader something unexpected or strange in the text, about the text, or resulting from the text**

This is the fun part! As brainstorm and develop your essay, you might try to “make a mountain out of a molehill” (so to speak). That is, you might tell your reader that they will be surprised by what you are telling them—seemingly insignificant or trivial actually unlocks important implications for interpreting what a text means—or what it implies.

**7- Revise, revise, revise (and proofread too)**

Excellent essays result from a process of writing and re-writing to build an interpretation and to find a focus. It is difficult to write a good essay in one sitting—better to write a draft, put it aside for a few hours, and then go back to it. Re-reading what you have written gives you new perspective on how to be clearer and more focused; it also opens up new considerations and ideas. So, try to approach an essay as something that you work on over a few sessions, rather than in one marathon session.

Other strategies that are part of the process: try to write an outline (although this outline may very well change significantly as you revise); free-write what you are thinking after reading a section of the text on which you are writing (this puts your reaction on paper as something that you can read and develop).

**8- Finally: a good thesis is often the final part of writing an essay**

In the process of writing an essay, you might start with a working-thesis that introduces an argument. It is very likely that you will end up changing your thesis several times in the writing process, especially as you settle on key terms, important quotes from the text to analyze, and key phrases from the text that capture the central concern of your interpretation. The process of revision leads to a great thesis that will begin your paper. (In early drafts of an essay, thesis is often at the end—and a revision moves the thesis to the beginning and leads to a revision of the body of the essay).

**Signs of a weak or under-developed thesis and argument:**

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**1- Your thesis is too general in scope or broad in statement**

If your thesis statement could be true of many texts, then it is too broad. Here is a test: can you simply cut and paste another novel (story, poem, autobiography, etc.) into your statement? If so, then your thesis statement is too broad.

**2- Does your thesis seem obvious, a cliché, a stereotype, or well-worn saying?**

For example, this is not a good thesis: “Frederick Douglass shows in a powerful way just how terrible slavery was.”

**3- Does your thesis declare something to be absolutely true? Not a good sign..**

Beware claims about “Human Nature”, “All People in History”, and Existence itself.

**4- Your essay contains a long plot summary or description of what happens in the book**

No reason to retell the plot of what we have read in class. In your process of writing, it might help to summarize the text as you figure out what you want to say about it. But this is at the draft stage— revision will cut down the plot summary and focus your argument and thesis (see #4, above).

**Suggested references, resources, and reading:**

- 1- Communication Support Services at the Centre for Applied English Studies (CAES), HKU  
<https://www.caescss.hku.hk/>
- 2- The Writing Center, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill  
<https://writingcenter.unc.edu/tips-and-tools/thesis-statements/>
- 3- Cathy Birkenstein and Gerald Graff,  
*They Say, I Say: The Moves that Matter in Academic Writing* (Gildan Media, 2014)