

The Scholarly Writing Handbook

presented by the

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Part One: How to Write the Thesis Statement

A thesis statement begins with a question, progresses to a statement, and develops into an analysis. In its simplest form, the thesis statement is the answer to a question. For example, the question “What is faith?” leads to an assertion that “Faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see” (Heb 11:1). That is a thesis statement that must be proved. A research paper based on that thesis statement would discuss the integral concepts of faith, hope, and certainty in the context of Christianity, or subjectivity, or existentialism.

In its ideal form, a thesis statement identifies the underlying motive of a story. Take the question, “What is the problem in *Othello*?” An insufficient answer is, “In *Othello*, Shakespeare portrays a great general whose trusting nature leads to the death of his wife and himself.” While accurate, that statement is nonetheless uninteresting and by now is common knowledge. Thus, a thesis statement must not only identify a valid problem, but it must identify a valid, interesting problem that is not self-evident to the average reader. A good thesis statement will provoke an argument in the reader’s mind and cause the reader to suspect its validity. Your paper is an attempt to convince the reader of the truth of what you are asserting.

In addition to being self-evident, faulty thesis statements may be descriptive, broad, narrow, or vague. Shakespeare’s *Othello* is a story that is particularly susceptible to these types of faults:

1. *Othello* is about the role of race in the 16th century. (BROAD)
2. *Othello* is about the struggle for power. (VAGUE)
3. *Othello* shows how Iago makes Othello jealous to accomplish his own ends. (DESCRIPTIVE)
4. *Othello* shows how the handkerchief functions as a symbol of subversion. (NARROW)

A **broad** thesis statement is one whose topic is too large for the parameters of a paper, as in #1. The subject of race is too complex to tackle for an entire time in such a brief space. One might remedy it through limitation, as in: “*Othello* is about the role of race in 16th century Venice.”

A **vague** thesis statement is one whose argument is not clearly or specifically delineated, as in #2. One doesn’t know what kind of power (political, sexual, military) or whose struggle (*Othello*’s? *Iago*’s?). If the thesis is attempting to embrace all of these elements, then it must be more specific: “Shakespeare’s *Othello* is a struggle for political, sexual, and military power between *Othello* and *Iago*.”

The **descriptive** thesis statement in #3 is specific (not vague) and limited to the particular theme of jealousy (not too broad), but its argument shows no purposeful direction. It contains information but is constructed in such a way as to cause the reader to question the utility of the information. In other words, it lacks purpose, which may be expressed as: “*Othello* demonstrates how *Iago* uses *Othello*’s faults to destroy his marriage, to ruin *Cassio*’s career, and to promote himself into higher office.” Although ungainly, this thesis statement reveals a clear, three-part structure that the reader can easily follow.

The **narrow** thesis statement in #4 introduces a problem directly opposite of #1: there is too little to write about. If pursued, this thesis statement will result in a descriptive paper that charts the progression of the handkerchief through the plot but reveals little or nothing about the characters.

Types of Thesis Statements

1. Interpretive

2. Historical or Conceptual
3. Theoretical
4. Summary

The best kind of thesis statement is one that identifies an interpretive problem in the text. Why is Hamlet indecisive? He fears damnation. What is Lear's folly? He desires power without responsibility. Your task as an English major is to look for the interpretive gap—a subject that no one has written on, or hasn't written on in the way you propose to do. These are the best and hardest kind of problems to find and formulate.

The next best paper is to write about a known problem in the context of its historical value: the influence on the author of a particular philosopher (Nietzsche in Fitzgerald's *The Beautiful and the Damned*), of a particular historical incident (the French Revolution in Dickens's *A Tale of Two Cities*), or the role of an idea in the work (the role of social ideas in Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*).

The next best paper after that is a formulation using a literary theory such as Marxism (Miller's *Death of a Salesman*) or Freudianism (Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler*).

Finally, the thesis statement that will lead to an unsatisfactory paper is the one that summarizes the work: "In Shakespeare's *Othello*, Iago destroys Othello, Desdemona, and Roderigo." In terms of methodology, a summary is similar to a descriptive thesis in that it presents information without making a distinct, problematic claim. Such a paper may possibly qualify as an essay, but it does not constitute a research paper.

Here are some examples of how a thesis statement begins with a probing question:

1. What is Okonkwo's fatal flaw in *Things Fall Apart*?

2. What is the metaphorical meaning of magic in *Faust*?
3. What is Ibsen saying about the production of culture in *Hedda Gabler*?
4. How does Borges illustrate his universal theme of the labyrinth in “The Garden of the Forking Paths”?
5. What role do “false” shepherds play in O’Connor’s short stories?
6. How do Naguib Mahfouz’s stories comment on the tension between restrictions and the desire for liberty in traditional Arabic society?
7. How does Dorr use the concept of revelation in his short stories?

Part Two: Using Secondary Sources

A primary source is the document or text about which you are writing your paper. Secondary sources are sources that speak about the primary document or about issues within the primary document. What is used as a secondary source in one paper can be used as a primary source in another paper. Usually secondary sources for a literature paper consist of literary criticism; however, there might be times when secondary sources include works that do not speak directly about the primary work; these works, for example, may be theoretical, historical, biographical, or psychological. If you are using secondary sources that do not mention the primary work, the connection between the source and the primary document must be made very clear in your paper. While secondary sources may include sources that do not discuss the primary source, the majority of sources in a literature paper should be literary criticism.

The main purpose of a secondary source is to provide support for your argument. You are showing the reader that there is enough expert evidence in the field to validate your interpretation of a text. You may also use secondary sources to show opposing points of view and argue against them. You should fully engage and wrestle with your primary document before you seek out secondary sources. If you read secondary sources in preparation for a research paper without having reached some valid and plausible conclusions about the text on your own, the chances of your paper being a rehashing of a particular source's argument increase significantly, and you want to avoid that. A good research paper is one that reveals an awareness of prominent thinkers in the field and one that shows an ability to integrate your thoughts with the thoughts of scholars in an effective and convincing manner.

Every secondary source should be introduced the first time it is used in the paper with the first and last name of the author and thereafter with the last name only. All quotations must be followed by a personal response clarifying or explaining what it is that you want the reader to see from the quotation in relation to your own argument. To put it more concisely, your quotations must have an introduction and a response, or analysis, at the end. A quotation that seems to float in a paragraph without clear anchors to the discussion will lead to a reduction in the grade. Avoid excessive use of quotations, especially block quotations. The use of block quotations must be limited and done for very specific reasons. Any change in a quotation must be evident with the use of brackets.

A problem that arises when writing research papers is the overuse of secondary sources. Here is a rough estimate of the recommended breakdown between your voice vs. the voices from secondary sources when writing papers: 75% / 25% or 70% / 30%. 70-75% of the paper should be your voice with 25-30% being the voices of sources. Remember that this is your paper in which you are using sources to support what you have to say; it is not the other way around. Finding an excellent source can also be a problem because that source can take over the paper; don't let that happen. Avoid reading sources simply to find a quote to stick into the paper; it defeats the purpose of using secondary sources. Understand what the source is saying in general; attempt to evaluate the school of criticism from which the source is coming. Ideally, the reading of secondary sources should be a regular part of your reading experience. Whether or not a research paper is due, it is to your benefit to read secondary sources as often as you can. In addition to developing your critical thinking skills, you will see how good arguments

are developed, and you will also find yourself clarifying your own interpretation of a particular work.

Any information from a source that is not properly documented (following MLA documentation) is plagiarized; a paper that has any form of plagiarism will lead to a failing grade for the paper and for the class.

Part Three: The Scholarly Paragraph

Though sophisticated scholarly essays often begin with an extended introduction (in which the author not only establishes his or her thesis but provides the historical, philosophical, cultural, or political context in which that thesis can best be understood), the central task of literary analysis is the examination of texts themselves. Paragraphs that carry out this important work invariably consist of three primary ingredients:

- 1) **Assertions**, in which the writer states an opinion that he or she will later support;
- 2) **Evidence**, in which the writer proves his or her assertions using direct quotes or paraphrases from primary or secondary texts;
- 3) **Analysis**, in which the writer examines the direct quotes or paraphrases he or she has introduced and explains how they support both the assertion and, broadly speaking, the thesis.

Though the lines between these elements often blur—though a complicated sentence may consist of more than one element—all literary analysis is constructed using these three tools.

In the samples that follow—a freshman essay, an essay by a senior English major, and a professional essay published in an important peer-reviewed journal—each element of criticism is identified according to the color code established above. Though they do so with varying levels of sophistication, each selection makes use of similar techniques.

Selection #1

from “**Unintended Victims in *Hamlet*,**”

a research essay written by a TNU freshman in ENG 1080:

Thesis: In *Hamlet*, Shakespeare argues that the act of murder claims more than its intended victim.

Sample Paragraph:

Though Ophelia's fate is presumably by her own hand, her death can be traced directly to the killing of Polonius. Shortly after her father's death, Ophelia is seen singing strange songs as if she has gone mad. Indeed, King Claudius defines the behavior as "the poison of deep grief; it springs / all from her father's death" (4.5.72-73). This is one clear way in which the effects of murder stretch outside of those involved in the event. Ophelia experiences grief as any daughter would at the sudden and unexpected loss of her father. Shakespeare notes that loss greatly affects one's disposition. In the first act, Ophelia speaks in romantic terms, saying of Hamlet, "He hath importuned me with love / in honorable fashion" (1.3.111-112). By the fourth act, Ophelia, in her weary state, has abandoned all traces of romance and sings, "Young men will do 't, if they come to 't; / By Cock, they are to blame" (4.5.59-60). This suggests a major alteration in the temperament of Ophelia. Her death soon follows, signifying that she became overwhelmed by a situation beyond her control. Though Queen Gertrude proclaims the death an accident, a priest later expresses otherwise, saying, "She should in ground unsanctified be lodged" (5.1.178). As Joseph W. Meeker suggests in "Hamlet and the Animals," "Ophelia's adolescent perplexity becomes insanity and leads to her death as she fails to cope with the bewildering events around her" (53). This insanity cannot be Ophelia's fault. Instead, her death is the unintended consequence of Polonius's murder.

The job of this paragraph is to establish the notion that Ophelia, specifically, is illustrative of the essay's thesis. Toward this end, the author must explain not only how Ophelia behaves and what others say about her, but how these passages further Shakespeare's ideas about murder. Note especially the sentences in blue. Here the author *explicitly* connects direct quotes from the text to both the essay's thesis and the paragraph's assertions. As a result, the reader easily follows the author's logic, and the paragraph succeeds.

Selection #2

from “‘**Child of This Mass and a Brother to all the Rest**’:

Childlike Imagery in Ian McEwan’s *Saturday*,”

a research essay written by a TNU senior English major in ENG 3490:

Thesis: [In his novel *Saturday*, Ian] McEwan portrays [protagonist Henry] Perowne as a child who, like the speaker of “Dover Beach,” is “swept with confused alarms” by the noise of a world that has outgrown him—and the rest of the world—without teaching him how to behave in it.

Sample Paragraph:

In *Saturday*, McEwan presents Perowne as a man at the peak of his life—lovely wife, affable children, job that he cherishes, expensive car—and yet the picture that the reader gets of Perowne through McEwan’s imagery is consistently that of a child who is new to this world. Indeed, the first vision that the reader gets of Perowne is akin to a birth scene. Upon waking up, “It’s not clear to him when exactly he became conscious, nor does it seem relevant. He’s never done such a thing before” (1). Perowne is bewildered by his own consciousness and seems taken aback by the world at large, like a newborn first taking in his surroundings. Standing—naked and with no discernible reason to be awake—he feels as though “he’s materialized out of nothing, fully formed, unencumbered” (1). These are the ruminations of a baby thrust suddenly forward into adulthood, and they continue as he moves towards his window “With no decision made, no motivation at all” (2). Perowne’s “premature awakening” (Ross 78) is a symbolic birth for the character, a moment that perfectly encapsulates his expectations for the Saturday ahead of him. He is full of hope for the day ahead of him and, indeed, for life as a whole. He “thinks the city is a success” (3) and admires his own square as “an eighteenth-century dream bathed and embraced by modernity” (3). These passages summarize Perowne’s positive outlook for the fate of a world ruled by science and reason.

Though its assertions, its critical voice, and the thesis to which it responds are significantly more complicated than the previous example’s, this paragraph, like the one featured in Selection #1, owes its success to the intricacy and thoroughness of its analysis. Here again, the author directly connects his or her evidence (in the form of

direct quotes) to the paragraph's central assertion. Note, furthermore, the prevalence of sentences that do more than one thing—that assert *and* give evidence; that give evidence *and* analyze. These moments provide a welcome layer of stylistic complexity.

Selection #3

from “**Moral Obligation, Disordered Care:**

The Ethics of Caregiving in Margaret Atwood’s *Moral Disorder*,”

a research essay written by Amelia Defalco

and published in *Contemporary Literature* 52.2:

Thesis: Margaret Atwood’s 2006 collection of connected stories, *Moral Disorder*, grapples with the complicated ethics of obligation, particularly the conflict between selfishness and sacrifice that can arise within the praxis of care.

Sample Paragraph:

The collection’s second story, “The Art of Cooking and Serving,” appeals directly to the service aspects of care, highlighting the often indistinguishable division between caregiving and caretaking. The narrator, now eleven, is forced to tend to her “expectant” mother whose “dangerous condition” demands constant aid and attention: “Something terrible might happen to her—something that might make her very ill—and it was all the more likely to happen if I myself did not pay proper attention” (12). Such “attention” involves a great deal of labor when the narrator and her mother are left alone at a remote summer house on an island while the narrator’s father is away; she sweeps the floor, pumps the water, scrubs the clothes, weeds the garden, carries in the wood, “all against the background of my mother’s alarming passivity” (15). Caring for her helpless, lethargic mother translates into constant, anxious toil; the threat of “the dangerous thing—whatever it was—[beginning] to happen” is terrifying and ominous (16). The narrator’s responsibilities and obligations are overwhelming and alarming since she is unsure of how to implement her concern for her mother, how to enact her desire to protect her. The demands of care remain abstract; though the narrator’s labor is apparent and substantial, there is little sense that her work is appropriate, appreciated, or even acknowledged.

Though this paragraph's interaction with, and analysis of, its source material is more sophisticated yet, its essential building blocks remain the same. The assertion relates directly to the thesis statement; the evidence lends support; and the analysis teaches the reader exactly how to understand the direct quotes chosen by the author. As in the previous examples, the third step—analysis—is the most important. Without analysis, the reader is forced to do the work of criticism alone.

Part Four: Final Thoughts

A research paper is not an easy paper to write regardless of where you are in your academic career. Part of the reason the paper is not easy to write is because no one can offer the writer an exact formula on how the paper should be organized. We can give general suggestions (as we have done in this manual), but the final decision as to what sentence, quote, or example goes where is yours. At times, a research paper can take a life of its own. You might begin with a clear idea on where you want to take the paper, but by the time you have finished reading your third source, your ideas have changed, and that is fine because it is part of the research process. The research paper and process are difficult, but there is probably no other exercise in the world of academia that will force you to think, analyze, organize, synthesize, clarify, and defend as this exercise will, and these are skills that will be invaluable in any field and in any occupation. Writing a good research paper is a challenging but worthy intellectual exercise.

Our best suggestion to you is that you do not wait till the final moment to write your paper. Complete it at least one week before it is due. As you are writing it, visit the writing center and your professor to see if what you are thinking is coming through in what you are writing. Be prepared to write several drafts of the paper. Give yourself enough time to walk away from the paper and to come back to it with a fresh mind. A fresh perspective is not possible if you are staying up all night to write a research paper that is due the next day.

This manual gives you general ideas on writing a research paper, but it is by no means the final authority on the subject. As mentioned, it is your responsibility to check with your professors and the writing center as you write your paper. It is also your

responsibility to consult the latest edition of the *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers* and to look at examples and directions on reliable sites such as

<http://owl.english.purdue.edu/>.

As instructors, we look forward to reading your thoughts and discoveries. We have proudly watched students grow in their abilities to present convincing and compelling interpretations of various texts. Writing a good research paper is more about discipline and hard work than it is about any innate talent. We welcome the chance to work with each one of you on your research ideas, and we hope that you will give us that chance.