**DEVELOPING THE THESIS STATEMENT MODULE**

**What is a Thesis?**

Arguably the most important sentence in the academic essay, the thesis statement is the central argument that a writer explores and defends in his or her paper. It must do several important things:

* make a focused claim that is debatable
* take a risk by saying something unique or even strange
* make an argument based on evidence (including contradictory evidence)
* govern the entire paper

A thesis is NOT:

* A topic. A thesis makes an argument *about* the topic.
* A purpose statement. The difference between a purpose statement and a thesis statement is the difference between summary and argument: a purpose statement describes an event or conclusion and details the way in which the essay will be organized, whereas a thesis statement argues a point and may include an element of organization. Nearly all academic essays require theses, but usually only longer papers include both.

**Starting from Scratch: Discovering the Thesis**

Occasionally, a client will want to create a thesis statement for an assignment without having any other written materials. In this case, brainstorming in order to help the client create a working thesis may help him or her move to the next stage in the writing process. Consider the following strategies:

Questions, Questions, Questions

1. Begin by asking, “what interests you, and why?” Write these ideas down.
2. Transform these ideas into claims, for at its essence, a thesis makes a claim. Most claims fall under one of five categories (a claim can include more than one of the following, since these categories are interrelated):

**Resemblance-** This type of claim highlights the similarities between two (or more) elements or texts while also detailing the differences. It then proves the significance of these similarities or differences, drawing conclusions without judging or valuing one over the other.

**Evaluation-** An evaluation claim builds off the idea of comparison, but makes a judgment as to which element is better. This kind of claim might also take shape by comparing and contrasting the writer’s opinions with the opinions of another and explaining why the writer’s views are correct.

**Definition-** This type of claim uses evidence to argue the meaning of an abstract idea or subject.

**Causal-** A causal claim suggests that one element affects another or that a particular outcome is the result of a specific cause.

**Proposal-** This kind of claim argues whether an action or solution should or should not be implemented.

1. Help the client hone in on his or her favorite or most unique claim. Continue posing “how,” “why,” and “so what?” questions to probe deeper into the topic and to develop a working thesis.
2. List what must be discussed in the paper in order to prove this thesis. Ask questions to ensure the thesis is rich and detailed.

EXAMPLE: Since successful, new teachers are influential in reshaping stagnant educational policies, the insufficient number of new teachers in school systems across America could contribute to the failure of worthwhile reform ideas.

* Define “stagnant policies” that new teachers influence
* Explain how such teachers influence policies
* Detail why so few new teachers are entering the system
* Discuss examples of worthwhile reform ideas that might not come to fruition without teacher support

Graphically display the thesis development if possible. The following chart displays two ways to go about creating a thesis, depending on what the client brings to the session. If the client has notes and sources he or she plans on using as evidence, but has no clear idea of where to begin writing, you might suggest using **inductive reasoning.** If, on the other hand, the client has a sense of what his or her argument might be, but needs to gather evidence to support this tentative claim, **deductive reasoning** might be more suited to the session.

Inductive Reasoning vs. Deductive Reasoning

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| 1. Search through the evidence/text for patterns and details. | 1. Start with an initial hypothesis, a working thesis that suggests connections between differing ideas. |
| 2. Isolate the details and evaluate their initial meanings without making judgments, hypotheses, or assumptions. | 2. Look through evidence with this thesis in mind and continue to make connections, careful not to ignore evidence that doesn’t fit. |
| 3. Evaluate their deeper meanings and connotations until it becomes possible to find connecting themes throughout the evidence. | 3. Continue to revise the thesis with the inclusion of new evidence that supports or refutes the initial claim. |

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| --- |
| Form a thesis statement that incorporates your evidence into a cohesive claim, recognizing that this statement is vulnerable and subject to change. |

Compare/Contrast Diagrams are another way to graphically display the development of a thesis.

General/Me/The Text

This table forces the client to address general assumptions as well as the client’s own opinions and the meaning of the text. Use full sentences to encourage the formation of claims early on, and include page numbers when applicable.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| General | Me | The Text |
| Most people I’ve met tend to like dogs more than they like cats. | Cats are my favorite animal. | Recent polls show that 74% of Americans say they like dogs a lot, while only 41% say they like cats a lot (10). |

Venn Diagram

The Venn diagram is a classic tool for comparing and contrasting two ideas. It usually exists in bullet-point form, but can be used to create more complex organizational tools.

*Initial Claim: Early Conservation had negative effects.*

Topic A Similarities Topic B

Conservation removed land use rights of Appalachian citizens, who then set fire to government land

Native Americans were removed from Yellowstone and their controlled fires could no longer benefit the land

--hurt people

--harmed ecosystem

--people removed from land

--fire

Modified Venn Diagram

This modified version allows for subcategories and for more detail. Encouraging the client to write similarities in complete sentences forces him or her to make claims early on in the writing process and produces possible claim statements for use in the body of the essay.

*Assignment: Compare the searches for truth and faith in Milton’s and Spenser’s respective texts.*

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Milton | Similarities | Spenser |
| Form: Persuasive Speech   * addressing a specific audience: Parliament * straightforward | Milton and Spenser use different rhetorical strategies in depicting their quests for truth and faith. | Form: Allegory   * no specific audience (literate people) * hidden meanings * layers and details |
| Religion   * Protestant- keep questioning to find truth * publish books free from censorship * arguing a point: to question the church is encouraged | If Christians do not constantly question their religion, they will drift away from both faith and truth. | Religion   * Protestant- obvious * pokes at Catholicism * Redcrosse doesn’t question and he screws up all the time |
| Appearance vs. Substance   * should not be a forced outward consensus masking inner divisions | Just as Spenser criticized Redcrosse for his internal sin, so too Milton reproaches the Church for masking its inner divisions. Both Church and Redcrosse must redress these discrepancies between appearance and substance to achieve their quests. | Appearance vs. Substance   * outward appearance of virtue disguises sin |

**Starting from a Draft: Clarifying the Thesis Statement**

More often than not, clients will have drafts that lack clear thesis statements. Clients may also come to the Center thinking they have thesis statements when what they really have are summaries. In this case, your job as a tutor is to help a client move from a sentence that describes something to a sentence that takes a stand. In other cases, you may have to create a thesis from the points made in the existing draft.

The Three-story Thesis

One way to begin moving from summary to argument is to identify a thesis as falling into one of the “Three-story Thesis” categories. The goal of this is to transform a thesis from explaining a surface-level claim to a making strong, in-depth argument. Review it below:

The **one-story thesis**makes a statement that lacks analysis, answering “what?” without interpreting between elements. This type of thesis simply shows the writer is familiar with the material.

EXAMPLE: Hermione Granger is a stereotypical bookworm.

The **two-story thesis** analyzes facts and examines relationships and connections between elements, answering both “what?” and “how?” without exploring tension or contradiction. This type of thesis helps the reader understand something he or she might have otherwise missed.

EXAMPLE: By contrasting bookish and heroic qualities, Rowling shows that Hermione Granger is not just a bookworm.

The **three-story** thesis­, or **tension** thesis, encompasses all angles of an issue, using tension or contradicting elements to qualify relationships and make an argument that answers “what?” and “how” while also exploring the “why?” question. This type of thesis challenges assumptions and proves a statement, usually explaining its significance to the world at large.

EXAMPLE: Although Hermione initially displays all the characteristics of a stereotypical bookworm, her subsequent displays of courage, adventurousness, and loyal friendship prove that she is a round character.

**Progressing from one “story” to the next:**

* Repeatedly ask questions: Why is this interesting? Why does it matter? How does this relate to the assumptions of others?
* Be specific: If the client is interested in how different authors view a particular issue, for example, which texts or aspects of a larger issue will he or she explore? How are these texts similar? How do they differ, and why? Why do these differences or similarities matter?
* Revisit the texts or evidence: Have new patterns become visible? How did this exploration of the text differ from the last? Is the topic more complex that it seemed at first?
* Focus on relationships: How is each idea connected to the next? Does one contradict another? Is one a result of the previous idea? Do two ideas coincide or reflect each other?

Using Existing Paragraphs

Sometimes it helps to think of the thesis and its accompanying paragraphs as part of a symbiotic relationship: while the thesis guides the meaning and order of these paragraphs, the paragraphs in turn must support the thesis. If the client has a thesis but lacks a draft, he or she must build this relationship by creating paragraphs that support the thesis. If, however, the client has a draft but lacks a thesis, he or she must then create a thesis that encompasses the argument made by the existing paragraphs. Consider the following strategies:

* The backwards outline is your friend! Creating an outline of the essay helps make visible the claims made in the existing paragraphs. These sub-claims can then be used in creating an all-encompassing thesis statement.
* Charts or diagrams that clarify connections between the existing claims often help draw out deeper ideas about the topic. A thesis can then be drafted from the resulting connections.
* Consider the evidence. What does all of the evidence seem to indicate? What type of claim fits best (resemblance, evaluation, causal, definition, or proposal)? Use the guidelines of this type of claim as a template for creating a thesis.

Prioritize

When analyzing a thesis statement, you might find yourself overwhelmed with too many issues in one sentence. Ask yourself the following questions when reading through a thesis in order to help you determine where to begin. If you come to a question and the answer is “no,” then address this issue before moving on to the next.

1. Does the thesis answer the question or assignment?
2. Does the thesis statement make an argument that is debatable?
3. Is the argument specific, focused, and original?
4. Can the argument be supported with evidence?
5. Does the thesis incorporate any counter-arguments or contradictory evidence?
6. Will the reader glean the organization of the paper from the thesis?
7. Does the sentence follow the rules of grammar, syntax, and style?

**Module Comprehension Check:**

* 1. How does a tutor choose between inductive and deductive reasoning as a thesis-development strategy?
  2. How do you add necessary “tension” to a thesis statement?
  3. How do charts help clients draft thesis statements?
  4. How do backwards outlines help clients draft thesis statements?
  5. What is the #1 priority for all thesis statements? What should you do if you and your client cannot figure it out?