

# 5.c.

## The Thesis

---

### 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.

**What about theses in essay exams?** In an essay exam, the thesis is the one-sentence answer to the question posed; the remainder of the paper will prove 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 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. It is just one possibility among many.

(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 already 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.

## **IV. PRESENTING THE THESIS**

**The thesis paragraph** (See also the handout entitled “The Three Parts of a History Paper.”): The first paragraph of your paper should be your thesis paragraph. The function of this paragraph is to define the problem your paper addresses, define key words and concepts you will use, and present your argument in summary. A thesis paragraph is not an opportunity to meditate on the history of the world; you do not have enough space in a thesis paragraph to do anything more than fulfill the purposes stated above. The last sentence of this paragraph should be your thesis. Here is an exercise which may help you develop your thesis paragraph. Answer the following questions:

What is the thing that happened? Succinctly introduce the event which frames your paper.

*Starting in the 1890s, the legislatures of the southern states began to pass a series of laws which by intent and in practice removed African Americans from the voting population. Despite the passage of the Fifteenth Amendment in 1870, which guaranteed black men’s right to vote, African Americans found themselves steadily disfranchised through legal chicaneries like grandfather clauses, literacy tests, and all-white primaries.*

Why should we be interested in the thing that happened? Explain the significance of exploring this topic. What problems will you help us solve? What insights does your exploration promise?

*Historians have long wondered why this new spate of legislation appeared so long after the failure of the Republican Party in 1877. If Reconstruction ended black Americans’ dreams of meaningful political equality, why did southern whites delay for over a decade their efforts to disfranchise blacks? Perhaps the new measures signaled not the continuation of old forms of racial control, but the rise of a new, more hostile form of racial thought among white Southerners.*

How and/or why did it happen? This is the thesis.

*Legal disfranchisement did not begin until twelve years after the end of Reconstruction, for it took an economic downturn in the South and the coming of age of the first generation of southern African Americans born into freedom to trigger legal efforts to keep blacks away from the polls.*

These sentences, when placed together, could constitute a thesis paragraph. Notice three things about this paragraph:

- (1) The thesis, while it effectively encapsulates the argument, can not stand alone. It requires the sentences which precede it to “set it up.”
- (2) These sentences not only perform the functions described in the questions, they introduce and explain key dates and terms (disfranchisement, Reconstruction, economic crisis, 1890s, etc.)
- (3) The paragraph presents an entire argument in brief. It therefore lays out a structure for the paper. The author of this paper knows what needs to be established in the body of the

paper (and hence, has an outline), and the reader has a “road map” for following the argument.

This road map may be:

Establish that southern states started passing new disfranchisement laws in the 1890s. Historical examples would be nice.

Introduce the historical dilemma: why the gap between the end of Reconstruction and the start of disfranchisement. A brief summary of the historical debate would help here.

Introduce and develop the idea that disfranchisement resulted from new forms of racial thought rather than grew out of old ones. Examples demonstrating the ways disfranchisement reflected new ideas are required here. Comparing new and old ideas of race seems called for.

Discuss how economic downturn helped create a new situation in which new racial ideas could emerge. This is the first part of your thesis. It will require evidence of an economic downturn, and relate that downturn to new ideas of race.

Discuss how the coming of age of the first generation of southern African Americans born into freedom helped create a new situation in which new racial ideas could emerge. This is the second part of your thesis. It will require evidence of this new generation, and demonstrate how whites reacted to this development with new ideas of race.

Finally, you will have to link the new ideas of race to the rise of disfranchisement laws. You may be able to do this within the last two sections of the argument; if not, it will be necessary here.

**Why is the thesis placed in the introduction?** In a mystery novel, the puzzle is not solved until the end. But in history papers, your conclusion should appear first. Readers need to know what you are arguing from the beginning, so they can evaluate your argument as they read. This means that often you cannot write a good thesis statement before you have undertaken the arduous work of understanding your sources and argument. I cannot stress this enough: once you have written a draft of your paper, go back and refine your thesis statement.

**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.)