

## Thesis Statement Script

This workshop has been designed for a 50-minute class, and should last no more than 45 minutes if run as efficiently as possible. In longer classes, this leaves extra time which can be used either for other (non-Writing-Studio-assisted) class activity or for extending the time allotted for the activities below.

**Note to Consultant:** While this script is full of content, it should not be seen as strict or constraining; rather, it is designed to provide guidelines upon which you can rely, but which you can also depart from. Your role in facilitating a workshop is to generate and guide conversation, so do what works for the class. Also keep in mind that if you have a way of talking with clients about, for instance, thesis statements that you find more useful or that better suits your own style, then please feel free to make use of that, or even to rewrite any portion of the script for yourself—this can help to make you a more comfortable and effective facilitator. However, if you are nervous about being in front of a class and not knowing what to say, this script should provide a useful resource to which you can turn at any point.

## Materials Required

**From Writing Studio:** Index cards for minute papers; Handouts: [“How Do I Write a Thesis Statement? / Thesis statement checklist!”](#) and [“Some They Say / I Say Templates for Argumentation”](#)

**From Instructor:** Paper prompt and examples of weak theses (please provide 3-5 theses which would be weak or unacceptable, guidelines below in Appendix 1) – *be sure to bring enough copies for students*

## Objectives

- Students will learn how to develop an argumentative thesis.
- Students will consider how to situate their arguments in relation to an ongoing scholarly conversation.
- Students will begin to draft thesis statements for their course paper.

## Plan

I. Concentrated Writing Studio Presentation (5 min.)

II. Activity 1—Brainstorming a Thesis (15 min.)

*Have students take about 3 min. to either write down what they think the thesis of their current paper is, or brainstorm what they think it might be or want it to be.*

*Take the next few minutes to **ask students** to share some of the characteristics of appropriate or good thesis statements. What they were trying to accomplish as they were drafting? Use the following (bullet-pointed) material to supplement the discussion along the way. (Keep in mind that this should a conversation rather than a lecture.)*

Good thesis statements will typically have the following characteristics:

- Argumentative: By argumentative, we mean that a thesis should state a claim which can be disputed, rather than simply announcing a topic. For example:
  - Announcement: The thesis of this paper is the difficulty of solving our environmental problems.
  - Thesis: Solving our environmental problems is more difficult than many environmentalists believe.
- Focused: It should answer the prompt and be narrow enough to discuss and prove within the assigned length.
- Controversial: This doesn't mean a thesis should address a hot-button issue, but that a *reasonable* person could argue an alternative (or opposite) position. For example:
  - Not controversial: *Romeo and Juliet* is a play about young lovers struggling against their families.
  - More controversial: While it is true that *Romeo and Juliet* is a play about young lovers, the most complex relationships are those between the young characters and their older mentors.
- Supportable: *The demand that a thesis be controversial does not mean that it should be ridiculous or indefensible.* A thesis will clearly require evidence to prove—and will often make it clear what *kind* of evidence will be required.
- Significant: It should explain why it is worth arguing for.
- Directed: a good thesis will often hint at (or say explicitly) *how* the argument will be proven. As such it is a condensed argument. For example:  
BEFORE: World War II led to the modernization of industrial facilities in Japan  
AFTER: World War II led to the modernization of industrial facilities in Japan, by doing X, Y, and Z.
- Sometimes people wonder whether a thesis has to be just one sentence. While it is often the case that theses are single sentences, this doesn't necessarily need to be so. In many disciplines it is acceptable to write a thesis statement, rather than a thesis sentence. **Ask the instructor:** For this assignment, do you have a preference?

**Ask the instructor:** Are there any specific suggestions you can give about constructing a good thesis in this field?

Distribute “How Do I Write a Thesis Statement?” Handout. On the back of this handout you will find a checklist that can serve as a good reminder of the qualities of a strong thesis.

III. What is a Thesis? How do I make one? (10 min.)

Use previous discussion to segue into a discussion of what a thesis statement is and what it does, as well as what the characteristics of a good thesis statement are.

At this point, we have discussed what makes a thesis “good,” but we haven’t necessarily discussed what a thesis is or how to make one.

So, I think most of us know that a thesis is a kind of argument, but let’s talk a bit more generally about why academics make them. A thesis statement articulates a contribution to an academic conversation. This means that a thesis statement does not come out of nowhere, but instead needs to be situated in relation to arguments commonly accepted in a field and perhaps also against arguments advanced by individual experts in that field.

Most successful academic writers use a series of three strategic moves to lay out their arguments. At the Writing Studio, we term these moves: stasis, destabilization, and resolution. A **stasis** might be a commonly held assumption in a field or a persuasive position argued by one or more experts in the field; it provides the backdrop against which the writer will situate his or her own argument. The **destabilization**, often signaled by a “however” or a “but,” is the moment when the writer initially distinguishes his or her position against the stasis. The **resolution** articulates why the destabilization matters: What are its broader implications? How does it offer a new and important outlook that scholars within the field need to take into account?

A strong thesis statement consists of the destabilization and may also articulate a resolution. The stasis serves to set the thesis up. This means that the stasis and destabilization should always be established in the introductory paragraphs. However, there is more flexibility with the resolution. Sometimes it is essential to articulate the resolution early as part of the thesis statement, but the resolution can also be developed over the course of the paper or be addressed in the conclusion.

**Ask the instructor:** When you make an argument in your discipline, what kinds of questions do you ask yourself when you are framing a thesis? What are you hoping your thesis will do?

*Direct students’ attention to “They Say/I Say” Handout.* This handout, and the book from which it is drawn, suggests these formats as ways of thinking about making claims in relation to other thinkers or commonplaces in the field. Theses often call into question the thoughts of major thinkers in a field, or the commonplaces, the unquestioned ideas or assumptions of a field.

Sometimes the discussion in the field will be clearly delineated, and you can directly address the people with whom you are arguing. *Point students to the “Disagreeing, with reasons” portion of the They Say/I Say handout.*

Sometimes you will not be able to directly address other participants in the conversation, in which case templates that identify commonplaces or issues in the field, such as those listed under **“Introducing ‘standard views’”** or those at the bottom of *“How Do I Write a Thesis Statement?”*, may be more useful.

**Ask the class** (and encourage **the instructor** to contribute): Let’s brainstorm: What are the field-specific commonplaces or assumptions that you are engaging in this class? Which (if any) of these templates look most like the kind of arguments you see in this field? *Put answers on white board/blackboard.*

Before we move on, it is worth noting that sometimes when we begin to write, we are not yet sure what kind of intervention we are making. If, when you begin writing, you have trouble with the thesis, or deciding what kind of an argument it will be, try making a working thesis to help you as you write:

*Write on white board or chalk board:*

In this paper I will argue that \_\_\_\_\_ because/by \_\_\_\_\_.

Then, once you have a clearer idea of the thrust of your paper and the nature of its intervention, come back and revise the working thesis.

IV. Activity 2. Review of prompt and revising sample theses (10 min.) *Depending upon the number of theses you work through, this activity can take a longer or shorter amount of time.*

*Turn students' attention to the weak theses provided by instructor, alongside "Thesis Statement Checklist" (on the back of "How Do I Write a Thesis Statement?")*

Your instructor has provided a prompt and a set of theses that a student might write to answer this prompt. Each of these theses is weak in various ways, and our goal is to revise them in order to make them more appropriate for college writing assignments. *If length allows, ask a student to read the prompt aloud.*

*Activity 1: As a group, run through the checklist to test the theses against the checklist, and ask for suggestions to modify the thesis to make it stronger. When the class is finished with each thesis, **ask the instructor** to suggest potential revisions to make it even stronger, or more discipline appropriate.*

**Ask students:** From this exercise, can we say what qualities might characterize a good thesis for this assignment?

V. Activity 3. Refining the Thesis Statement & Wrap-up: (10 min.)

*Give students about 5 min. to work on refining their own thesis statements from the beginning of class. Then have a reflection conversation on the types of changes students made.*

**Ask students:** As you were revising, what did you prioritize? What seems most important to keep in mind as you continue to work on your thesis?

As you continue to develop your arguments for papers in this class, remember that a Writing Studio consultant can work with you on this and any other aspect of writing, from initial brainstorming through revision of a full draft.

## VI. Minute Paper

Distribute the index cards and ask the students to answer (anonymously) one question on each side.

Question 1: What is the most important thing you've learned about thesis statements today?

Question 2: What questions or concerns do you still have regarding thesis statements?

Collect these responses. If time permits, it might be worthwhile to read some or all, especially of Question 1, aloud. And possibly also to invite brief answers to the concerns raised in Question 2, if you decide to read any of those.

## Appendix 1: Writing Bad Theses

Students find it extremely helpful to discuss what is bad about some sample thesis statements written for the actual assignment on which they are writing.

The workshop, and the handouts, focus on good theses being:

- argumentative (make a claim, not just broadcast a topic)
- controversial (debatable, not obvious)
- supportable (defensible, given the resources from class and the assignment)
- focused (answers the prompt and fits the page requirements, not too big or too small)
- significant (why is it worth arguing for?)
- directed (it is a condensed argument and hints at or almost outlines the direction of the paper)

So we ask you to write 3-5 bad theses:

- boring, entirely uncontroversial
- mere summary w/o a claim
- too vague or too broad
- too personal, is about the student's opinion in the most obvious way, rather than formulating an interpretation.
- Or, if there's a particular problem you regularly see, just generate one bad thesis that makes that typical mistake.

Please e-mail the examples to the Writing Studio staff member facilitating the workshop and bring copies to distribute or have them ready to produce on screen for all to see.