

Planning the Paper: Establishing the Thesis

Before writing a paper, make sure that you narrow down the topic so that you can find a unique way to address it. By defining a broad topic into a specific statement or question, you will progressively be establishing the thesis of the paper, i.e. its central idea.

Brainstorming

Brainstorming helps to collect information and organize ideas at each step of the writing process. As you narrow down the topic, write down all the ideas that come to mind in order to transform a broad topic into a specific thesis statement or question. If there is too much information to cover, you may need to define the topic further; if there is not enough information available, you may need to find another topic. Try the following strategies:

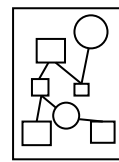
Bulleted Lists



Highlighted Words



Mind Maps



Sticky Notes



Defining the Topic

The initial topic of the paper is often too broad to be fully explored in the required number of pages; it is up to you to define it and make it your own. Think of this as a funnel!

Use critical thinking to narrow down the topic.

- What is my topic? What are my goals? (What)
- Does it focus on a community, on a group or on a person? (Who)
- Does it focus on a continent, on a country or on an area? (Where)
- Does it focus on the past, on the present or on the future? (When)
- What is the targeted event or process? (How)
- What are its possible causes and consequences? (Why)

The thesis of a paper is the idea on which the entire paper is based. Therefore, it must be the result of a comprehensive reflection. If it is formulated as a statement, the paper must prove its validity; if it is formulated as a question, the paper must answer it. Whether it is expressed in the form of a statement or question, a strong thesis has three qualities: it is specific, argumentative, and explanatory.

Use critical thinking to formulate a clear thesis.

- What are the different aspects of the topic? Which ones will I study? (Specific)
- What is the debate surrounding the topic? Which position will I take? (Argumentative)
- Why do I want to take this position? How will I defend it? (Explanatory)

To know more, see the *Purdue OWL*, *SPARK*, *Infosphère*, or similar writing centre websites.

Establishing the Thesis

Topic: Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*

1st attempt: In *Frankenstein*, Mary Shelley portrays an interesting cast of characters.

- Is it specific? No, this thesis does not specify which characters will be discussed in the paper. Who is interesting?
- Is it argumentative? No, this thesis does not take a position. How can it be backed-up?
- Is it explanatory? No, this thesis does not explain what makes the characters interesting. Why will the paper discuss them?

2nd attempt: In *Frankenstein*, Mary Shelley establishes an important contrast between Victor and the monster.

- Is it specific? Not quite. This thesis now mentions two characters, but what opposes them?
- Is it argumentative? Not quite. This thesis does not take a strong position. How can it be reinforced?
- Is it explanatory? Not quite. This thesis now mentions a contrast, but why is it important?

3rd attempt: In Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, the contrast in attitude between Victor and the monster shows that the true horror is not the monster itself, but the selfishness that made Victor abandon him.

- Is it specific? Yes, the thesis specifies the nature of the contrast between the two characters.
- Is it argumentative? Yes, this thesis offers an interpretation of the novel that can be challenged and discussed.
- Is it explanatory? Yes, this thesis explains the effect of the contrast between the two characters.

Thesis: In Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, the contrast in attitude between Victor and the monster shows that the true horror is not the monster itself, but the selfishness that made Victor abandon him.

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