The Sheridan Baker Thesis Machine

Follow these steps to turn a topic idea into a working thesis for your paper.

Step 1: State the topic under consideration.

Examples: (a) cats, (b) writing classes, (c) grades

Step 2: State the specific issue in the form of a debating proposition.

(a) Resolved: Cats should be subject to leash laws.
(b) Resolved: Writing classes should be abolished.
(c) Resolved: Grades are unnecessary in college.

Step 3: Using a because clause, convert the resolution into a sentence that states your position on the issue and provides a main rationale for that position [= rough thesis].

(a) Cats should be subject to least laws because they are inveterate wanderers.
(b) Writing classes should not be abolished because many students are unpracticed writers.
(c) Grades are unnecessary in college because students learn more rapidly without them.

Step 4: Polish and refine the rough thesis by adding qualifications (using an although clause) and removing the because clause [= thesis].

(a) Although it is against a cat’s instinctive wanderlust to be restrained, the crowded nature of city life demands that cats not be allowed to roam around freely.
(b) Although gifted high school graduates should be exempt from writing classes, most entering students need help in attaining college-level writing skills.
(c) Although there may be a legitimate need to evaluate the work of college students, the traditional grading system hinders learning and stifles creativity.

Step 5: Test your faith in the thesis and explore potential counterarguments by reversing your position.

(a) The cat’s independent and adaptable nature makes it the only pet capable of living an unrestricted existence within the city.
(b) Although introductory writing classes may have remedial value for some students, most high school graduates possess writing skills sufficient for success in college course.
(c) Traditional grading procedures may offend educational purists, but public school systems require pragmatic approaches to evaluation.

* Adapted from Sheridan Baker, The Practical Stylist*