Thesis Secrets and Pitfalls

Use this handout when you start drafting a rough version of your thesis.

**Thesis Secret #1: A strong thesis statement is the vector of your argument. It expresses your position.**

* Example: John Irvine’s introduction to the Bantam Classic edition of *Great Expectations* offers a fresh perspective on Dickens’s novel, but the introduction is ultimately unsatisfying for its lack of character analysis.

**Thesis Secret #2: A thesis does not have to be one sentence.** Obviously, you should obey any specific directions you have received from your instructor, and you should also follow the conventions of your specific discipline. But in general, you will find that you need several sentences to express a complex argument and define the context for that argument.

* Example: “The default for avoiding [a] discussion of racism is to invoke a separate principle, one with which few would disagree in the abstract—free speech . . . [But the] freedom to offend the powerful is not equivalent to the freedom to bully the relatively disempowered. The enlightenment principles that undergird free speech also prescribed that the natural limits of one’s liberty lie at the precise point at which it begins to impose upon the liberty of another.” – Jelani Cobb, “Race and the Free Speech Diversion”

In the above example, the crux of the argument has been underlined. But in order to understand this argument in all its complexity, we need the surrounding sentences. Thus, the formula you may have learned in high school – a thesis should always be one sentence, placed at the end of the first paragraph – may not serve you well when writing longer, more complex essays.

**Thesis Secret #3: A strong thesis should be arguable.** This is not to say that every thesis statement needs to be provocative or take one side in a polarizing issue. However, if you cannot imagine any reasonable person disagreeing with your thesis or learning anything new from your paper, then this means your argument needs more originality.

* + Example: “Faced with tornados, floods, volcanoes, and hurricanes, we do little but let nature run its course, try to limit the damage, and clean up in the aftermath. But when it comes to wildfire, we think we can do more. We think we can fight it. We now spend more than $3 billion a year on that effort, but . . . fire suppression is a battle we can’t ever win, and in some cases shouldn’t even be fighting. With so many people now living in the wildland-urban interface . . . firefighters battle ever-larger wildfires to protect increasing numbers of homes. The result is a cycle of tragic inevitability.” – Brian Mockenhaupt, “Fire on the Mountain”

Note that most people would agree with this argument’s basic premises: wildfires are dangerous; human life is more important than property; firefighters should not risk their lives unnecessarily, etc. Nevertheless, this author has found an arguable point within the topic: despite the risk wildfires pose to people’s homes and property, “fire suppression is a battle we can’t ever win, and in some cases shouldn’t even be fighting.”

**Thesis Secret #4: A Strong thesis tells readers what is at stake.** Put differently, a strong thesis emphasizes something that will interest, challenge, persuade, or enlighten the audience.

* Example: “In a striking number of animated kids’ movies of the past couple of decades . . . [mothers are dead or missing, and] the dead mother is replaced not by an evil stepmother but by a good father . . . The ineluctable regularity of the dead-mother, fun-father pattern [exists for a reason] . . . Quite

(over)

* simply, mothers are killed in today’s kids’ movies so the fathers can take over . . . And when plucky kids and plucky dads join forces, it looks like fun! . . . I imagine those fathers look great to most kids. **But let’s call a spade a spade . . . It’s misogyny made cute . . . Patriarchy is slyly served**.” – Sarah Boxer, “Why Are All the Cartoon Mothers Dead?”

Once again, the crux of this argument has been underlined: in contemporary children’s movies, the mothers die “so the fathers can take over.” On its own, this thesis is only mildly interesting. What we need are the sentences in boldface, which go beyond the argument to explain the larger *significance* of the argument. By killing off mothers and replacing them with fathers, kids’ movies suggest that mothers are expendable, and this is “misogyny made cute.”

**Thesis Secret #4: A strong thesis will be limited in scope and use highly specific language.** Writers often make sweeping claims when they’re in the early stages of envisioning a paper. Likewise, many essays begin with vague references to abstract terms, such as “society” or “justice.” However, the strongest essays focus on something highly specific and use carefully selected details to *arrive* at the big ideas.

* Example: “My love for [*The Hunger Games*], at its purest, is not really about Peeta or anything silly . . . I love that a young woman character is fierce and strong but human in ways I find believable, relatable. Katniss was clearly a heroine, but a heroine with issues.” – Roxane Gay, “What We Hunger For”

Note that this essay will focus primarily on Katniss Everdeen, the flawed heroine of *The Hunger Games*. Nevertheless, the author will use this subject to make broader points about gender and the type of heroines that readers find “relatable” and inspiring.

**Thesis Secret #5: All thesis statements are provisional until you turn in the final essay.** Most of us write our way *towards* meaning, developing stronger and more refined versions of our arguments as we move through the writing process. Begin with a rough thesis and throw it out if you think of a better one. Additionally, keep checking all of your body paragraphs to determine whether these points still relate to your thesis, or if they were developed for an earlier version of the argument.

**Thesis Pitfalls**

**Thesis Pitfall #1: The Shopping-List Thesis**. Don’t rattle off a list of different ideas and expect readers to do the work of synthesis. A strong thesis sets up a relationship *among* your points.

* Example: John Irving’s introduction to *Great Expectations* is successful because he examines character motivation, addresses issues of style, and explores Dickens’s plotting devices.

If you find yourself making a list, ask whether you could re-order the items on that list (or re-order the body paragraphs in your essay) without making a big difference to the overall paper. If the answer is “yes,” then push yourself to develop a more specific argument in which one example leads to, builds on, intensifies, complicates, or contradicts other examples. This might involve eliminating one or more of your examples and finding a different piece of evidence, one that helps you to build a more focused and precise case.

**Thesis Pitfall #2: The Sky-Is-Blue Thesis.** A thesis is not a simple statement of fact. Nor should it express a widely accepted, highly familiar idea.

* Example: The American Civil Rights Movement was significant because racial equality is important.

If you find yourself with an unoriginal thesis (“equality is important”), then step back and ask yourself **where the complication resides** in relation to this insight. Yes, racial equality is important, yet America still has many instances of racial *in*equality. Why is this value so difficult to realize?

**Thesis Pitfall #3: The Vague Hand-Waver**. Vague and general thesis statements almost always lead to five-paragraph essays, because the argument lacks a clear sense of purpose. Thus, the paper can easily break down into a mechanical recitation of loosely related points.

* Charter schools should be applauded because they take a progressive approach to education.

What does the author mean by “progressive”? Is a progressive approach always a good approach? A thesis statement does not need to offer a road map for the essay as a whole. However, by the time readers finish the introduction, they should have a general sense of what types of issues and evidence will be discussed in the paper.

**Thesis Pitfall #4: Overly general language.** The following words and phrases can be dangerous when used too freely in thesis statements.

**Huge Historical Sweep**: throughout time, throughout history, age-old, since the dawn of time, since Adam and Eve, since our country was founded

**Huge Population Sweep**: society, culture, America, throughout the country, throughout the world, all over the world, humanity, mankind

**Ghost-Like Authorities**: experts contend, people think, scientists agree, authorities believe, it can be seen, it has been noted, it is often said

**The Scary Present Day**: in these modern times, today’s world, today’s society, modern world, fast-paced, industrialized

**At-Least-To-Me Humility**: in my opinion, it seems to me, at least to me, it can be said

**Essayisms**: Webster’s defines, firstly/secondly/thirdly, in conclusion, there is, there are

**Wishy-Washy Badness**: crisis, problem, epidemic, scourge, plague

**Wishy-Washy Goodness**: important, crucial, nice, interesting, good

**Just Plain Wishy-Washy**: many factors, in a way, basically, kind of, sort of, pretty much, things, stuff