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Revising Thesis Statements

This handout is designed to help writers revise thesis statements early in the drafting process. It reviews definitions of "thesis statement" and "working thesis." It offers characteristics of both weak and strong thesis statements so writers can learn to evaluate thesis statements. It suggests writers test thesis statements by asking themselves questions, because when writers question their own ideas, they actively deepen their thinking about their topic. Thus, this handout encourages writers to clarify their ideas by asking themselves questions and by using specific language to strengthen thesis statements.

A **thesis statement** is an essay's main idea summarized in one or two sentences. It's like a contract with your readers; it's the statement you'll support with the evidence and specific details. A thesis statement is not, however, chiseled in stone. It evolves as you draft and discover what you have to say about your topic.

A tentative or **working thesis statement** captures what you think you have to say about your topic as you begin drafting. Think of this as a hypothesis to be tested, as an idea that will change and become clearer as you write. Revising early thesis statements can also help you see ways to narrow your topic and clarify audience and purpose.

A **weak thesis** doesn't make a claim or doesn't need to be proved. A weak thesis simply restates a fact or an opinion that almost all readers already agree with, tells readers something they already know, or offers an unexamined opinion.

Note: A writer often starts out with a weak thesis statement. However, as she revises, she will begin to see ways to strengthen her thesis so that it better reflects careful thinking and writing about her topic.

A **strong thesis** argues a point (makes a claim) readers can disagree with. It creates tension and takes an assertive stand on the writer's topic. A strong thesis results as you work at revising drafts, asking yourself questions about your topic in order to clarify your ideas.

Writers can sharpen working thesis statements throughout the writing process. Question your thesis. The habit of challenging your own ideas by asking yourself questions helps you both develop (write more about) and analyze those ideas. Asking yourself questions about the diction (word choice) you use to express your ideas can help you strengthen a working thesis. Apply some of the suggestions listed in this handout.

Suggestions for Evolving or Revising Your Thesis

1. Some working thesis statements offer only vague, general ideas, expressed in vague, general language. Begin revising by circling all generic words like people, things, you, everyone, society, etc. Substitute more specific words for the circled terms.

Working thesis: *You should treat people the same and not do things that favor one group over another.*

What more specific words could this writer substitute for *you*? *Managers? Parents? Teachers? Coaches? Judges?*

What about *people*? *Night shift workers? Children? Students? Team members? Clients?*

Questioning can help you narrow your audience (what specific group of people are you talking to?), your purpose (what do you want to teach those folks about your topic?), and your topic as you draft and revise. Choosing specific words also helps establish your credibility by letting readers know you have thought about your topic and have something important to say about it.

Revised thesis: *Coaches should treat all team members equally and not favor one player over another.*

This revised thesis still makes an obvious claim that most readers will already agree with. Continue asking questions: *Why should coaches treat all team members fairly? What happens if they don't?* (Other team members feel left out. They think their contributions are not valued. They quit working hard.) *If coaches have favorite players on the team, what does that favoritism do to team morale?* (Morale suffers and players will not work together on the court to win.)

Revised again: *Basketball coaches should treat all team members equally and not favor one player over another because favoritism can damage team morale.*

The questioning strategy helped this writer narrow his topic to a discussion of basketball coaching. His purpose and audience are more specific: he will discuss the damaging effects of favoritism on player morale with undergrads studying to become coaches. He may “tweak” his thesis even more as he continues to draft, but this thesis is more specific. It gives readers a clearer idea of what his paper will be about. Most importantly, it gives this writer a clearer idea what specific points and particulars to include in his draft.

2. Underline the words or ideas that should be explained or “unpacked” so readers understand your exact meaning. Ask yourself questions to help develop your ideas.

Working thesis: *American schools are in sad shape.*

This writer probably knows what she means by “sad shape,” but her readers do not. She needs to “unpack” those words for readers, explain and clarify what she means: *What does “sad”*

shape” mean? That the buildings are in disrepair? That playground facilities are dangerous and outdated? That students don’t have access to computers? That students are not adequately prepared for college work? That fine arts programs have been eliminated?

America is full of all kinds of schools. What specific one(s) does she want to write about? Elementary? Middle school? High school? Magnet schools? Inner city schools? Parochial schools? Private schools? Suburban schools?

Revised thesis: *Inner city high schools are not equipped with up-to-date computers.*

3. Check the verbs in your working thesis. Eliminate linking verbs (*is, was, has been, should be,* etc.) whenever possible and substitute strong action verbs. Ask yourself questions to better develop your ideas about your topic.

Working thesis: *Inner city high schools are not equipped with up-to-date computers.*

Linking verbs do exactly that – ***they link sentence parts together***. They don’t do anything else. They don’t argue. They just say a situation exists. This writer’s thesis doesn’t take a stand on the use of up-to-date computers in high schools. Readers might respond to this unexamined opinion with “*So what?*” or “*What’s your point?*” Other readers might ask, “*Where’s the tension?*”

Are, a linking verb, is a clue that this writer needs to think more carefully about her topic.

Asking herself questions can help this writer strengthen her thesis. Getting at some of the reasons behind this working statement can help:

Why do inner city schools lack up-to-date computers? Because parents don’t care? Because teachers lack training in computer instruction? Because Congress has cut aid to public schools? Because the city has cut property taxes?

What’s at stake if inner city students don’t get training on up-to-date computers? They’ll be seriously disadvantaged in college? They’ll not be prepared for jobs that require computer literacy?

Revised thesis: *Inner city schools without up-to-date computer labs fail to prepare students for college and the work place in a world increasingly dependent on computer literacy.*

4. Check your thesis for broad, sweeping claims; statements like these are difficult to support. Limit or qualify the language of your thesis.

Working thesis: *IUPUI students come to campus for classes and are not interested in campus activities.*

This writer’s claim is not true of all IUPUI students. Many of them are deeply involved in campus organizations or hold jobs on campus that involve them in the life of the university. If she qualifies her thesis to include “Some IUPUI students” or “IUPUI students who juggle full-

time work and family responsibilities,” this student writer’s thesis becomes stronger and more accurate.

To say all 26,000 IUPUI students “*aren’t interested*” oversteps this writer’s claim too. “*Usually are not interested in participating in campus activities*” or “*seldom have time for campus organizations*” is more accurate.

Revised thesis: *Returning IUPUI students come to campus for classes, but because they juggle work and family commitments, seldom have time for campus organizations.*

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