Honing Thesis Statements

Brought to you by the NVCC-Annandale RWC
Objectives

- To explore what a thesis statement is, where it goes, and how it functions within the broader context of an academic essay
- To investigate ways of going from a topic to a thesis statement
- To show examples of thesis statements that could use honing
- To talk about how arguable thesis statements are using examples
What does it mean to “hone” a thesis statement?

- **hone (v):** to make more acute or effective; improve; perfect: *to hone one's skills.*

The purpose of this workshop is to develop thesis statements that are clear and effective.
What is a thesis statement?

A thesis is a single statement that:

- is clear
- is concise (only uses necessary words)
- is arguable, and...
- presents your position to the reader
Where does a thesis statement belong?

- A thesis statement goes in the introduction. Because the role of a good introduction is to act as a kind of “road map” to the remainder of an essay, the best place for your position is in that first first paragraph.
What is the purpose of a thesis statement?

- The thesis statement exists for the benefit of the reader AND to hold you, as the writer of the paper, accountable for proving something.

- When you present a thesis statement in the introduction, it lets the reader how you have come to interpret the evidence you are presenting in the paper. In other words, it helps the reader know what to expect from your essay.
Developing a Thesis Statement If You Are to Choose the Topic

- Even if you are not given a specific question or topic to address, your thesis statement needs to answer a question you explore in the paper.
- Choose a topic appropriate to the scale and length of the paper requirements.
- Allow your reading and preparation to write the paper generate questions within you, and choose the most interesting question as the one to address in your paper. The thesis statement is your “answer” to the question, and it serves as the springboard by which you will explain to your audience of readers how you have come to know what you know.
What if you are assigned a topic to consider?

- Develop a question that comes out of the assignment sheet you were given concerning the topic.
- Your “answer” to that question is your thesis statement.
- Sometimes you will need to do research before you are prepared to make such a statement, but other times you can base your ideas on opinion and anecdotal evidence. Know whether or not you need research before beginning the essay assignment so that you can establish an applicable writing timeline before you begin.
Going from a Topic to a Thesis

• Let’s say I’m interested in writing about Emily Dickinson. Emily Dickinson is my topic, not my thesis.

• Let’s say after much research I am interested in the way Dickinson’s biography informs (or adds substance to) her poetry.

• A thesis statement for such a paper might be:

Emily Dickinson’s biography plays a role in her poetry.
“Emily Dickinson’s biography plays a role in her poetry.” While this statement is clear, it’s not the best hinge for a 3-5 page essay. This thesis needs to be narrowed.

**Which words in the sample thesis statement above could be more specific?**
Our Example: Emily Dickinson’s biography plays a role in her poetry.

In the example above, “Emily Dickinson” is specific; it focuses on one, specific individual.

“[B]iography” and “poetry” are the more general parts of the sentence. If we were to “hone” this thesis, we would want to turn the general concepts into specific ones.
• An example of how to improve our general thesis might look something like this:

Emily Dickinson’s use of the personal pronoun “I” evokes tension in poem #277.

This thesis statement sets up an argument that has to do with the difference between poet and speaker in a specific poem, poem 277.
Characteristics of Strong Thesis Statements

- A strong thesis statement takes a position.

Outsourcing has positive and negative effects.

Is this a strong thesis statement?

- “Outsourcing has positive and negative effects” is a weak thesis because it takes both sides of a debate instead of asserting a position.
Characteristics of a Strong Thesis Statement

- A strong thesis statement is worthy of discussion because it addresses something significant instead of an observation made in passing.

- A strong thesis is specific.

- A strong thesis is arguable.
A strong thesis expresses one main idea. Here’s an example of a thesis that needs honing from Purdue’s Writing Center website:

“Companies need to exploit the marketing potential of the Internet, and web pages can provide both advertising and customer support.”

The problem with this thesis statement is that the reader will not know what to expect. Is this a paper about Internet marketing, web pages, or customer support?

The thesis needs, therefore, to establish the relationship between important terms.
“Companies need to exploit the marketing potential of the Internet, and web pages can provide both advertising and customer support.”

This statement can be improved. One revision suggested by the Purdue site is the following:

“Because the Internet is filled with tremendous marketing potential, companies should exploit this potential by using web pages that offer both advertising and customer support.”
Arguable Thesis Statements

- It is important to develop a thesis that is arguable.

- To say, “Mark Twain is the best writer that has ever lived” is arguable, but the implied terms of that thesis are not narrow enough. This thesis, if approached well, would have to discuss every other writer “who has ever lived.” This is not possible in a 3-5 page paper.
“Mark Twain is the best writer that has ever lived” could be better, right?

The above statement could be called a “working thesis”; that is, it is a position but it’s not yet what you want your argument hinging on.

A better thesis might be:

“Mark Twain’s success as a writer lies in his use of humor to critique American life.”
We have discussed how to develop and hone a thesis.

Remember, the thesis must be a statement. It is never a question.

The role of a thesis is to present your position on a topic using specific terms (i.e.: “humor” and “American life” from an aforementioned example).

The thesis allows the reader to “follow along” in a way that is determined by you in the introduction.

If an essay’s thesis statement does not do this (in the introduction), there is very little at stake because the reader does not know what to anticipate out of the essay.
For more on Thesis Statements

Visit the following online resources:
http://www.unc.edu/depts/wcweb/handouts/thesis.html#5

*UNC’s Writing Center has a thorough litmus test to help you answer the question, “Is my thesis strong,” and it offers advice for students who want to hone an existing thesis.

*The UPenn English department classifies theses as “bad” or “better” here:
http://www.english.upenn.edu/Grad/Teachweb/scthesis.html
Thank you for using this workshop today. Please use our resources again.