

Getting from Topic to Thesis

For many writers, a description of what a thesis is, or what a thesis does, answers only part of the question, “How do I write a good thesis?” For a full description of the process of writing a thesis, we need to start earlier, before the writer has even begun reading the material that will form the topic of an essay. This handout describes a process of preparation and engaged reading that will prepare you to compose a thesis. The handout assumes that you are reading a text, but the process will work just as well, with a little translation, for analysis of visual or multimedia texts. This handout draws on ideas from two books on writing that I recommend highly: Timothy Corrigan’s *A Short Guide to Writing about Film*, which has especially useful things to say about preparing to watch a film, and David Rosenwasser and Jill Stephen’s *Writing Analytically*.

Step I: Prepare Yourself to Read

Even when writers take up a wide range of subjects in their writing, they usually return to a handful of central concerns or passions that drive much of their best work. An original thesis will come from the intersection of your interests and the details of the text, so you can prepare for the reading by reflecting on ways you might find to engage it. In reading a literary text, you especially want to prepare yourself to read elements of the text that move beyond following plot and character. You may even want to learn the plot of a text in advance so that you can concentrate on other factors.

For example, you can choose to attend to the writer’s technique. How does the title establish the reader’s expectations for the work? What metaphors does the writer use at the beginning of the work, and how do they develop later in the work? How does the form of the work (sonnet, short story, novel) influence its content? How does the writer form sentences, paragraphs, or stanzas?

You might also concentrate on a way of thinking about texts in general: a theoretical approach. You could prepare yourself to notice how the author constructs masculinity, femininity, and sexuality, or class relations, or power. Who does the work in the world of this text? What forces other than people act on the characters? If you enjoy reading for historical and contextual details, and you are going to read a Victorian novel, you could prepare yourself by reading about the author or the specific time the novel is written or set. If the work is written in 1865 but set in 1801, what questions would make sense to ask?

Or you could think about the technologies of reading and writing that influenced the creation and reception of the text. Are you reading the text in the same way its first readers would have? What does the author assume the reader already knows?

Best of all, you could prepare yourself to combine some of these elements. Perhaps you will find a connection between the production of novels in the 1860s and the way a given novel represents class relations, or a connection between race relations in Los Angeles in the 1990s and a poet’s choice to write an altered version of a sonnet. You probably will notice connections of this kind immediately, but the more preparation you have done, the readier you will be to find them.

Step 2: Read for Patterns and Oppositions

The most persuasive and sophisticated essays about a text often begin with lists. Simply noticing patterns can take you a long way towards understanding how a text works, especially if the pattern is unexpected—the pattern of horse imagery in James Joyce’s “Araby,” which takes place in the middle of Dublin, for instance—or when two patterns collide. The patterns you find might involve images, characters’ ways of speaking, the buildings or landscapes of a work, or virtually anything else. You may also find that two opposing patterns (images of light and dark, characters issuing commands and asking questions, etc.) reveal themselves as you read. The more you have prepared yourself for reading, the more you will be able to find these patterns.

Step 3: Look for Complications

On its own, pattern will not lead easily to a strong thesis. Your reader will not be surprised if your paper says that a poem about a farm has a pattern of animal imagery. Readers (and teachers) value complications: patterns that sometimes break, unexpected patterns, combinations of patterns that seem not to go together. Whereas a simple list might cause your paper to become repetitive and therefore to use words and phrases such as “in addition,” “also,” or “another example,” complications will lead your paper to use words and phrases such as “however,” “still,” “that said,” and “on the other hand.” Those complicating words and phrases signal the writer’s ability to consider more than one way of viewing and issue, balance them, and eventually bring them together in a thesis.

Step 4: Draft a Thesis by Adding Complexity to Patterns

The first version of your thesis will probably not be the same as the final one. A good thesis often grows out of the interaction of your first ideas and your writing process; the thesis leads you to start writing, and the writing leads you to revise the thesis, and the new thesis guides the next stage of writing, and so forth. Before that process begins, however, you need a way to get started. You can find it in the moments where your patterns break down and surprise you. When you have found a complication in a text that leads you to ask a question your essay can answer, you may be on your way to writing a strong thesis.