

UNIVERSITY-LEVEL WRITING: TOPICS & THESIS STATEMENTS

For most students, writing at the university level is a challenge. Every assignment will have different requirements, but whether you're writing an argumentative, reflective, exploratory or descriptive paper there are particular requirements and elements you must include. Strong essay-writing requires practice and development, but with the right understanding of what professors expect, you can become an effective writer, communicator and student.

STEP ONE: DEVELOPING A TOPIC

To write a strong paper, you need to understand how to choose an effective topic and how to develop a thesis based on that topic. The **topic** is what you are writing about. It can be anything from Canadian content regulations to the effects of globalization to the causes of climate change. The topic is the general idea you will be researching and discussing without opinion. It could be a question or problem, but not the answer to the question. Your **thesis**, however, will be the conclusion of your argument and your answer to the topic or question. To develop a strong thesis, you must first have a strong topic.

Focus the Topic

Broad topics lead to confusion, unclear theses and complicated research. Common comments on essays are "vague", "unclear" or "needs development", but you might be unsure of what these comments mean. Focusing the topic will allow you to find, select and effectively use your sources, ultimately helping you develop your thesis and use stronger evidence.

How do you focus your topic? There are a few different strategies and depending on the type of paper you're writing, you might focus your topic a different way. A good idea is to start asking questions: What interests you? What do you have an opinion about? Which topics would be easy to research without being too overwhelming or unmanageable? From there, you can go even further:

- Can you look at the causes of the topic? (e.g., what was the main cause of the French Revolution? The causes of climate change? The reasons for the banning of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*?)
- Can you look at the effects of the topic? (e.g., what were the effects of the French Revolution on France or Europe or North America? The impact of *Harry Potter* on adult fiction?)
- Are there different definitions of the topic? (e.g., how do different cultures—Asian and Western, for example—interpret feminism? How have these differences led to conflict?) Or how has a definition of a topic changed over time? Why is that change significant?
- Narrowing on time and/or geography is also helpful when trying to avoid broad topics.
- Generally, the best way to narrow your topic is to ask, "What about it?" The French Revolution: what about it? Climate change: what about it?

Assigned Topics

Occasionally your essay topic may be assigned, and your whole class might be writing on the same topic. How can your paper stand out when everyone is writing about the same thing? This is where your thesis becomes even more important. Your thesis will individualize the topic, and the evidence you use to support your thesis and the quality of your writing will turn an average paper into a great paper.

STEP TWO: THESIS STATEMENTS

After you've narrowed your topic you need to choose a thesis. Your thesis will be the answer to the question you've posed or what you think about the topic. The rest of your paper will prove why your thesis is valid, and how you discuss the evidence will determine how strong your thesis is.

When deciding on a thesis, you can look to the research you've done and the sources you've looked at. What theses show up in your research? What are the opinions of other authors? What are the controversial points? Could you look at something similar?

Keep in mind the reader's expectations and restrictions of the assignment when deciding on your thesis. What are the word/page limits? Who is the reader? What is their level of knowledge? Are you restricted as to where or what you can research? Are there any other assignment requirements?

Write your thesis in a clear thesis statement in the introductory paragraph. Be completely explicit so the reader doesn't have to guess or assume. Show it to a friend or TA to make sure it's clear.

To evaluate the quality of your thesis, you can use a checklist:

- Is your thesis an actual statement and not a question or purpose statement? (Remember, your thesis is the answer to the question.)
 - Bad: "How has professional hockey helped to establish a Canadian identity?"
 - Bad: "This essay will examine the role of professional hockey in the establishment of a Canadian identity."
 - Better: "Professional hockey has led to the development of a Canadian identity."
- Does your thesis argue that is something that is precise and can be supported with evidence?
 - Avoid statements that are overly subjective, general or broad:
 - No: "Einstein was the greatest physicist of all time. All his theories were, and continue to be, foolproof."
 - "Greatest" is too much to be supported or proven in a single essay. It would be better to carefully evaluate Einstein's theories (or one of this theories), examining its merits in the context of physics, and indicating how it has stood the test of time.

ACADEMIC

- Does your thesis actually argue something, or does it just state something unarguable?
 - Remember, your thesis needs to be contentious and arguable.
 - NO: “Henry Ford’s assembly line changed the way goods were manufactured.”
 - YES: “Henry Ford’s assembly line had a negative effect on society as it changed the way goods were manufactured.”
- Is your thesis important, relevant and interesting?
 - You want the reader to want to read your essay. One of the most important things you can do is be interested in what you’re writing; if you’re not interested in the topic, your writing will be as flat and passionless as the ideas themselves. Find something you actually want to write about and your essay will reflect your feelings.

Remember as well that your thesis might change as you continue your research. In fact, you should expect to revise your work as you go along. Begin your work with an open mind, and don’t be afraid to change.

REFERENCES

Buckley, J. (2009). *Fit to Print: The Canadian Student’s Guide to Essay Writing* (7th ed.). Toronto, ON: Nelson Education Ltd.

Trent University (n.d.) Topic and Thesis Development. Retrieved from <http://www.trentu.ca/academicskills/documents/TopicandThesisDevelopment.pdf>