

## Guidelines for Literary Argumentation

Remember that this essay asks you to avoid summary and personal response. In place of these two activities, you need to develop an argument about one or more works we've read. We often think of argument as hostile and immature behavior—say arguing with the referee. I, however, am using argument in a very different sense—the sense of persuading your audience to appreciate and perhaps even adopt your own position. Argument in academic contexts strives to appeal through reason and typically will avoid persuasion through emotional or morals. In other words, you wouldn't want to argue that the narrator from the "Yellow Wallpaper" deserves to be in a mental institution because she is a twisted, psycho man-hater. The language of your judgment carries so much emotion that it wields little power in academic contexts. Likewise, the argument that the main character in "The Black Cat" is going to hell because drinking too heavily is a sin depends on religious precepts rather than rational, academic persuasion.

So what is rational academic persuasion? It depends on the discipline. For English, however, it usually begins with an interpretation that can be supported textually. In other words, you need to argue your position by drawing evidence from the works we've read. Consider the following guidelines:

- You need to have a thesis. Your text analysis, like the rest of the essays you will write, will be thesis-driven. In fact, all of the essays you write for 110 and 111 will be thesis-driven. A good thesis doesn't guarantee a good grade, but a bad thesis guarantees a bad grade. Message—Give me a thesis with SAS! Make it Specific, Argumentative, and Significant.
  - **Specific:** Generalizations can be useful at the beginning of your essay, as you invite your reader into your subject or orient him/her within your topic; but a generalization *does not* belong in your thesis. The more general your thesis becomes, the more likely your reader is to say, "who cares?" Take, for instance, the following thesis: The Black Cat is written to show that evil exists in the world. Would anyone argue that there is no evil? If not, then why should we care about that thesis? Somehow, this thesis needs to define *evil* in "The Black Cat" more specifically—evil comes from within, or evil comes from the domestic and familiar.
  - **Argumentative:** In fear of being wrong, many students adopt a thesis that avoids controversy. Ironically, they invite a negative reaction by *trying to avoid* controversy! A fact of life is that every once in a while you have to face your foes by defending your carefully-crafted opinions. Academic writing is one of these situations. Consider the following thesis—"In 'The Yellow Wallpaper' the narrator can be interpreted as sane or insane." Once again, our reaction to the thesis is "so what?" Your thesis does not need to be so extreme as to contradict rational assessment, but it **DOES** need to make a controversial claim. Like *argument*, *controversy* has positive connotations in academic writing. So worry less about being controversial and more about defending your opinion as effectively as possible

- o **Significant**—When you satisfy the first two requirements, usually significance follows naturally, but every once in a while I see a thesis like the following: “The color *yellow* is very prominent in “The Yellow Wallpaper.” Once again, readers are inclined to ask, “So what??? Why should I care?” The writer here has failed to suggest any larger significance in his or her assertion. How do you insert significance? By showing your argument’s relevance to larger interpretative issues in the story. In the thesis above, we’d have to discuss conventional associations with the color yellow or perhaps the role yellow plays in reinforcing ideas of sickness already prevalent in the story. You may find it difficult to illustrate the significance of your thesis in one sentence. If so, take two or three to say what you need to say!
- In supporting your thesis, you need to be even more specific than in your thesis, drawing from clearly indicated passages of the story. In most situations, such precision involves quoting from the text.
- Finally, whenever you quote from the text, you need to discuss the passage, explaining its significance at the word level. It is not enough to point out in “The Story of an Hour” the description of the world outside Mrs Mallard’s window as evidence of Chopin’s descriptive language. You need to explain how what is being described signifies a world of possibility heretofore unexperienced by Mrs. Mallard. In other words, your discussion of the passages develops your argumentative train of thought and knits your current train with the overriding thesis.
- Although a concluding paragraph is not necessary, a few concluding sentences will provide necessary cohesion for your paper. Don’t restate verbatim what you said in your introductory paragraph, and don’t articulate an entirely different argument. Consider showing how your interpretation bears relevance to your own life or current events or ideas in the world around us. If it takes you more than two sentences to conclude, you’ll need a separate concluding paragraph.

# WHAT IS A THESIS STATEMENT?

No. 25 in the Writing Center Handout Series

A thesis is a declaration of an essay's argument. It provides a foundation for smaller arguments and guides the reader through the essay. Usually located near the end of the introduction, a thesis narrows your general topic to a specific, focused argument. A good thesis should answer the question, "What does this paper prove?"

## ★ Thesis vs. Topic

One of the most common mistakes students make is confusing the thesis with the topic.

- A **thesis** is a specific statement; a **topic** declares a general subject area.
- A **thesis** clearly takes one side of an argument; a **topic** is neutral.
- A **thesis** outlines the essay for the reader; a **topic** informs the reader of the essay's depth of discussion.
- A **thesis** is always a complete sentence or two; a **topic** usually is a fragment.
- A **thesis** is presented after introducing the general ideas; a **topic** might not be explicitly stated, but is clear within the first few sentences.

Examples:

**Topic:** the role of women in *Jude the Obscure* and *Dracula*

**Thesis:** Hardy and Stoker give us women who reflect Victorian cultural anxieties over gender flexibility and are characterized in relation to the historical movements of the fin de siecle.

**Topic:** the exclusion of blacks and women in the original Constitution

**Thesis:** Though the writers of the Constitution made citizenship a party to which many people, most notably blacks and women, were not invited, the way in which they decided to run the party made the later inclusion of these groups and others possible.

## ★ Attributes of a Good Thesis

How can you evaluate the thesis of your paper or another author's? Here are the four most important characteristics of a good thesis:

**A good thesis can be disagreed upon by reasonable people.** For your thesis to take a stand, another side must be valid (though you don't have to agree with it). Trying to think of the other side of your thesis can strengthen your argument and test the importance of your thesis. *★ (argumentative)*

**The thesis focuses the topic to the scope of the assignment.** Don't try to prove something too broad for the length of the paper. The thesis should reflect only what your research, expertise, and analysis show in the assigned number of pages. The author of the first thesis, for example, has narrowed her topic from "Victorian literature" to two works (by Hardy and Stoker). *★ (specific)*

**The thesis contains one main idea.** You may have twenty important arguments in your paper, but your thesis should show how those ideas relate, not just list them. Avoid a "laundry list" thesis that simply points to each of your body paragraphs' topic sentences.

**The thesis anticipates conclusions.** A good thesis states what the reader learns from reading the smaller arguments in the body. Don't save your thesis until the conclusion; instead, present the thesis first and back it up with other ideas. We can assume from reading the second sample thesis above that the author will conclude by showing that other groups, specifically blacks and women, have become citizens because of the Constitution's flexibility.

*Remember, even a good thesis may not fit the paper as it is transformed through revisions. Spend a good portion of your revision time making sure your thesis works with what the paper says as a whole.*

For more information on this topic, see:

*Academic Writing* by Iona Leki

*Writing from A to Z*, Sally Barr Ebst, ed.

<http://writing.richmond.edu/writing/wweb/thesis.html>



AGNES SCOTT COLLEGE

MCCAIN G-13  
(404) 471 6242

# HOW TO WRITE A THESIS STATEMENT

No. 26 in the Writing Center Handout Series

## Develop a Working Thesis

*A working thesis is a "rough draft" of your thesis statement. It can help you in the prewriting stage to organize your thoughts in an outline. Once you begin writing, the working thesis can make your first draft more focused, allowing you to concentrate on style in later revisions. Remember that this sentence is a "working" thesis: be flexible, allowing new ideas to emerge while writing and revising.*

The first step toward writing a working thesis is to formulate a strong argument. If your overall argument is weak or unfocused, your thesis statement will be similarly disordered. Thinking clearly and specifically about what your paper says can lead you to a sentence or two that articulates those ideas.

Respond to an assigned question in a complete sentence. Chances are, your response will contain the most important ideas of your paper, which you can use to build a thesis.

Try writing a sentence that begins with "I intend to show" or "I will prove." This is not a final thesis, but it is a way to get your main ideas into one sentence. Once you can state your ideas, take out the "I intend..." phrase and work on making the words represent exactly what you want to say.

Answer the question, "What is your paper about?" in one sentence. Knowing the answer to this question shows you have a good idea of what you prove— and what your thesis should be.

## Revise Your Thesis

*While a working thesis can launch you into a successful first draft, you will need to revise it in later drafts. Since the thesis is one of the most fundamental sentences in your essay, how you write it is particularly important. This does not mean you should aim for poetry; instead, work on writing a clear statement of your ideas.*

Persuade the reader to agree with your point of view. In many college essays, this persuasion lies in convincing someone to interpret a book, article, or event a particular way. Does your thesis strongly suggest a compelling argument? Try showing that your essay topic is controversial or ambiguous; then take a stand.

Ask yourself how and why. Instead of stating a general claim or opinion, look at the reasons behind an event and the significance of your argument.

Don't try to say too much. Cramming too many details in a thesis will obscure your main argument.

Make vague words and phrases specific. For example, don't say that a character is important; spell out that importance. Say that she provides the foundation for the narrative even though she is a minor character.

Let someone else read your introductory paragraph, and ask her to point out your thesis. She should be able to recognize your main argument and have an idea of where your paper leads.

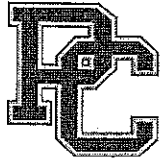
For more information on developing thesis statements, see:

*College Writing Skills* by John Langan  
<http://www.indiana.edu/~wts/wts/thesis.html>  
<http://english.ttu.edu/uwc/thesis.html>



AGNES SCOTT COLLEGE

MCCAIN G-13  
(404) 471 6242



## Quotations in a Literature Paper

To use a science metaphor, quotations are the raw data that you will use to prove your argument. Each paragraph should have at least one quotation that is fully analyzed. Look for quotations that illustrate the best example of something, are deeply symbolic, or shed light on a character. Expect that your explication will be at least *twice as long* as your quotation.

### DON'Ts:

- ★1. Don't drop quotations. A quotation should never appear as a **stand-alone sentence**.

Mrs. Bennett has a nervous disposition. "Don't keep coughing so, Kitty, for heaven's sake" (50).

- ★2. Don't use quotations simply to explain **what happens in the story**. (*plot summary*)

- ★3. Don't quote when a **paraphrase will suffice**. For example:

Louisa Bingley says, "I hope you saw her petticoat, six inches deep in mud, I am absolutely certain" (60). This could be paraphrased: Louisa criticizes Elizabeth by pointing out that her petticoat is muddy.

### DOs:

1. Do **give adequate context** for your quotations. Set the scene by describing, briefly, under what circumstances the quotation is spoken or written.
2. Do **choose** only the parts of a quotation that illustrate your argument. Feel free to excerpt fragments instead of full sentences.
3. Do **integrate** the quotation into your own prose.

### Options for Integrating Quotations

1. Introduce the quotation based on who is speaking; use synonyms to "say," like "notes," "declares," "asserts" or "observes."
2. If a **full sentence** precedes the quotation, introduce it with a colon.

Elizabeth observes that Pemberly exhibits both natural beauty and the taste of its owner: "She had never seen a place for which nature had done more, or where natural beauty had been so little counteracted by awkward taste" (135).

1. Break the quotation up into its most important pieces and weave them into your prose.

Ultimately, Donne doesn't fear death since in the afterlife, "Death shall be no more" (1.14).

- 6
2. Use **ellipses** (. . .) to take out words or phrases in the quotation that don't add to your argument. Do not use ellipses at the beginning of a quotation and don't use them at the end unless your reader might misunderstand the sentence structure or argument of the original source without them. (If you leave out items in a series or if the end of the sentence contradicts your quotation, for example.)
  3. If you need to alter a word or words within a quotation to make it match your prose grammatically, use **brackets** [] to enclose the alteration. However, avoid brackets as much as possible and try to restructure the sentence instead.

Jane Smith claimed that "nobody understood [her]." (You change "me" to "her")

Brackets can also be used to clarify pronouns or include supplemental information your reader needs:

Hamlet claims, "Why she would hang on him [Hamlet's father]."

### Formatting Quotations

Use long quotations sparingly only when you fear that omitting any words will change the meaning of the passage. Quotations **longer than four typed lines** should be introduced in your own words followed by a colon. Then the entire block is indented one tab (5 spaces) from the left margin. For this special format only, don't include quotation marks and put the period before the page number.

In an attempt to explain one of the major themes of *The Iliad*, Sarah Lawall states:

The two poles of the human condition, war and peace, and their corresponding aspects of human nature, the destructive and the creative, are implicit in every situation and statement of the poem, and they are put before us, in symbolic form, in the shield that the god Hephaestus makes for Achilles. (95)

**Verse quotations of three or fewer lines** are made part of your paragraph and enclosed in quotation marks. If the quotation is of more than one line, a front slash (/) is used to indicate where one line of verse ends and another begins. Note that you generally cite **line numbers** rather than page numbers for poems and plays in verse.

Upon learning of the death of Agamemnon, the Chorus cries out in shock to Clytaemnestra, "Demon of sudden destruction, / Laying the house in the dust forever!" (1515-1516).

**Verse quotations of more than three full lines** are to be treated as a blocked quotation. Try to mimic the appearance of the lines in the original source.

In a preface to one of his speeches, Orestes explains to Athena and the Furies:

I have suffered into truth. Well I know  
the countless arts of purging, where to speak,  
where silence is the rule. In this ordeal  
a compelling master urges me to speak. (274-77)

**Quotations within quotations** occur frequently, usually in the form of dialogue. If your quotation is in quotation marks (" "), the internal quotation will be in single quotation marks (' '). Thus, you end up with three quotation marks around quoted dialogue.

After the embassy to Achilles fails, Diomedes tells Agamemnon, "if only you'd never begged the dauntless son of Peleus, / holding out to Achilles trove on trove of gifts!" (9.851-52).