

Thesis Statements¹

An effective thesis statement:

- Makes an **arguable, analytical assertion** about a specific text (or set of texts) that you intend to prove throughout your paper; it introduces both a **claim** and a **reason** or **support** for that claim
- Provides a **road-map** for your paper; it makes a promise to the reader about the scope, purpose, and direction of the paper
- Is **clear, concise, and thought provoking**, *not* a statement of fact or observation
- Is **specific** and covers only what you will discuss in your paper and can support with evidence from the text(s), *not* a generalized or broad-sweeping assumption
- Offers enough **detail** for your reader to grasp your argument
- Appears in the **introduction** and is usually **1-2 sentences long**

How do I know if my thesis is strong?

- *Have I taken a position that others might challenge or oppose?*
 - If your thesis simply states facts that no one would, or even could, disagree with, it's possible that you are simply providing a summary or observation, rather than making an argument.
- *Is my thesis statement specific enough?*
 - Thesis statements that are too vague often do not have a strong argument. If your thesis contains words like "good" or "successful," see if you could be more specific: *why* is something "good"; *what specifically* makes something "successful"?
- *Does my thesis pass the "how and why?" test?*
 - If a reader's first response is "how?" or "why?" your thesis may be too open-ended and lack guidance for the reader. See what you can add to give the reader a better take on your position right from the beginning.
- *Does my thesis pass the "so what?" test?*
 - If a reader's first response to your thesis is, "So what?" then you need to clarify the significance of your argument, to forge a relationship, or to connect to a larger issue.
- *Does my essay support my thesis specifically and without wandering?*
 - If your thesis and the body of your essay do not seem to go together, one of them has to change. It is okay to rewrite your working thesis to reflect things you have figured out in the course of writing your paper. Remember, always reassess and revise your writing as necessary.

¹ Adapted from The Writing Center, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
<http://www.unc.edu/depts/wcweb/handouts/thesis.html>

How do I get a thesis?

A thesis is the result of a lengthy thinking process. Formulating a thesis is not the first thing you do after reading an essay assignment. Before you develop an argument on any topic, you have to collect and organize evidence, look for possible relationships between characters, themes, and plot devices (such as surprising contrasts or similarities, contradictions, etc.), and think about the significance of these relationships. Once you do this thinking, you will probably have a “working thesis,” an argument that you think you can support with textual evidence but that may need adjustment along the way.

Below is a sample working thesis paragraph written in the format I want you to use for your first close reading paper. It is *not* a “perfect” thesis paragraph. As you read, please make note of: (1) The strengths and weaknesses of the student’s **close reading** of the opening block quote- Which aspects of this analysis were compelling? What details does the student miss or need to elaborate on? (2) Identify the student’s **thesis statement**- What is effective about it? What needs to be developed further?

Sample Student Thesis

In the end, we’re all brains for hire. Mental space for rent, moments as a commodity. They have gotten it down to a science. How much a human being can take in a given twelve-hour shift. Grief, embarrassment, humiliation, all different, of course, so they calibrate our schedules, mix it up, the timing and the order, and the end result is you leave every day right about at your exact breaking point. (Yu 9-10)

In this passage, Charles Yu’s social commentary on the commodification of human bodies in “Standard Loneliness Package” speaks loudly; we learn that brains are “for hire,” “mental space” is up for rent, and moments are a “commodity.” Here, the author is making his claim and bringing forth the extreme, yet possible reality of our bodies and minds being so used and commercialized to the extent that they become objects that can be sold or pawned. “How much a human being can take in a given twelve-hour shift,” and “leave every day right about at your exact breaking point” are also key phrases that illustrate the pain and suffering the narrator is forced to endure for a mere “twelve dollars an hour” (Yu 3). Also, in this passage, and throughout most of the story, sentences are often written as lists, such as “Grief, embarrassment, humiliation,” and contain technical jargon like “calibrate our schedules” and “the timing and the order,” which closely evokes the working mind of a machine. This use of language and syntax gives the narrator of the story a specific voice that pushes us to recognize him as a machine-like byproduct of an unjust capitalist system. Through Yu’s deployment of the first person narrative voice and his description of technological advances, we are able to gain insight into the oppression and exploitation of the human body in the dystopian world he creates, where workers are used as a dumpsite for life’s negative experiences.