

Getting Started and Shaping the Thesis Statement

Getting Started

Pre-writing Basics:

- Brainstorming: list ideas
- Clustering: group together thoughts
- Questioning: interrogate the topic (who, what, where, when, why, how)
- Mapping: make relationships between ideas visual
- Free-writing: bring together the process of producing words and putting them down on the page.

Free-writing Strategies to Generate Ideas:

- First Thoughts: write out all initial impressions to get rid of mental clutter
- Prejudices: explore personal biases in order to determine which are arguments and which are personal preferences
- Instant version: write out everything that you want to say in order to determine a path for investigation

Free-writing Strategies to Sort Ideas:

- Narrative thinking: untangle thoughts by telling a story that shows connections between and among ideas
- Stories: relate a personal anecdote to larger issues in order to get rid of generalizations
- Scenes: focus on individual moments, exploring preconceptions, details, points of view
- Portraits: focus on qualities, characteristics, movements, appearances

Free-writing Strategies to Move Beyond the Ordinary and Obvious:

- Vary the audience: address a different reader
- Vary the writer: take on a different persona
- Vary the time: place yourself in the past or the future

Free-writing Strategies to Re-energize the Topic:

- Errors: write out false and dangerous mistakes
- Lies: write out the false, the funny, the ridiculous, the fantastic

Key Point: You must write down all of your ideas. Don't carry them around in your head, hoping to remember them for later. Get them out on paper as soon as possible!

Shaping the Thesis Statement

Thesis Myth versus Thesis Reality

Myth: You need a thesis before you start writing because you don't know what you are going to write about until you state your thesis.

Reality: Don't be surprised if

- You don't have any idea what you want to write about until you pre-write (See previous strategies.)
- Your thesis isn't clear until you finish your first draft
- Your thesis changes as your ideas develop.

The Thesis Statement

- Introduces an idea within a broader topic
- Places the idea in a context in order to make a point.

An Effective Thesis Statement:

- States a central idea
- Requires supporting evidence
- Has an adequate scope for an essay of the assigned length
- Is sharply focused.

An Effective Thesis Statement IS NOT

- Too factual
- Too broad
- Too vague

Testing a Tentative Thesis:

- Is the thesis too obvious? (If you cannot come up with an idea that opposes your own, consider revising your thesis. Go back to free-writing strategies!)
- Can you support your thesis with the evidence available? (Don't belabor the obvious and don't make tenuous connections!)
- Does the thesis require an essay's worth of development? Or, will you run out of points too quickly? (Don't add fluff!)
- Can you explain why readers will want to read an essay with this thesis? (Ask yourself the following question: So what?)

Bibliography

- Elbow, Peter. Writing With Power. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1981
- Hacker, Diana. A Writer's Reference. 6th ed. NY: Bedford/St. Martin's Press, 2007.
- Lunsford, Andrea and Robert Connors. The Everyday Writer. NY: St Martin's Press, 1997.