

Writing an Effective Thesis

DRAFT
THESIS

The first polygraph was developed by Dr. John A. Larson in 1921.



PROBLEM The thesis is *too factual*. A reader could not disagree with it or debate it; no further development of this idea is required.



STRATEGY *Enter a debate* by posing a question about your topic that has more than one possible answer. For example: Should the polygraph be used by private employers? Your thesis should be your answer to the question.



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THESIS

Because the polygraph has not been proved reliable, even under controlled conditions, its use by employers should be banned.

Writing an Effective Thesis

A thesis should be an answer to a question, not a question itself.

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THESIS

Would John F. Kennedy have continued to escalate the war in Vietnam if he had lived?



PROBLEM The thesis is a *question*, not an answer to a question.



STRATEGY *Take a position* on your topic by answering the question you have posed. Your thesis should be your answer to the question.



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THESIS

Although John F. Kennedy sent the first American troops to Vietnam before he died, an analysis of his foreign policy suggests that he would not have escalated the war had he lived.

Writing an Effective Thesis

A thesis should be of sufficient scope for your assignment; it should not be too broad.

DRAFT THESIS

Mapping the human genome has many implications for health and science.



PROBLEM The thesis is *too broad*. Even in a very long research paper, you would not be able to discuss all the implications of mapping the human genome.



STRATEGY Consider *subtopics of your original topic*. Once you have chosen a subtopic, take a position in an ongoing debate and pose a question that has more than one answer. For example: Should people be tested for genetic diseases? Your thesis should be your answer to the question.

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Although scientists can now detect genetic predisposition for specific diseases, policymakers should establish guidelines about whom to test and under what circumstances.

Writing an Effective Thesis

A thesis also should not be too narrow.

DRAFT THESIS

A person who carries a genetic mutation linked to a particular disease might or might not develop that disease.



PROBLEM The thesis is *too narrow*. It does not suggest any argument or debate about the topic.



STRATEGY *Identify challenging questions* that readers might have about your topic. Then pose a question that has more than one answer. For example: Do the risks of genetic testing outweigh its usefulness? Your thesis should be your answer to this question.



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Though positive results in a genetic test do not guarantee that the disease will develop, such results can cause psychological trauma; genetic testing should therefore be avoided in most cases.

Writing an Effective Thesis

A thesis should be sharply focused, not too vague. Avoid fuzzy, hard-to-define words such as *interesting*, *good*, or *disgusting*.

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THESIS

The Vietnam Veterans Memorial is an interesting structure.



PROBLEM

This thesis is *too fuzzy and unfocused*. It's difficult to define *interesting*, and the sentence doesn't give the reader any cues about where the essay is going.



STRATEGY

Focus your thesis with concrete language and a clear plan. Pose a question about the topic that has more than one answer. For example: How does the physical structure of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial shape the experience of visitors? Your thesis—your answer to the question—should use specific language that engages readers to follow your argument.



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THESIS

By inviting visitors to see their own reflections in the wall, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial creates a link between the present and the past.

Testing a Working Thesis

Once you have come up with a working thesis, you can use the following questions to evaluate it.

- Does your thesis answer a question, propose a solution to a problem, or take a position in a debate?
- Does the thesis require an essay's worth of development? Or will you run out of points too quickly?
- Is the thesis too obvious? If you cannot come up with interpretations that oppose your own, consider revising your thesis.
- Can you support your thesis with the evidence available?
- Can you explain why readers will want to read an essay with this thesis? Can you respond when a reader asks "So what?"