Thesis Statements: Revision

This handout, designed to help writers revise thesis statements early in the drafting process, defines “thesis statement” and “working thesis.” It offers characteristics of both weak and strong thesis statements so writers can learn to evaluate them. Writers can test thesis statements by asking themselves questions, because when writers question their own ideas, they actively deepen their thinking about their topic. Thus, this handout encourages writers to clarify their ideas by asking themselves questions and by using specific language to strengthen a thesis statement.

A thesis statement, an essay’s main idea summarized in one or two sentences, is like a contract with your readers; it’s the statement you’ll support with evidence and specific details. A thesis statement is not, however, chiseled in stone. It evolves as you draft and discover what you have to say about your topic. A tentative or working thesis statement captures what you have to say about your topic as you begin drafting. Think of this as a hypothesis to be tested, as an idea that will change and become clearer as you write.

A weak thesis fails to make a claim. Instead, a weak thesis simply 1) restates a fact or an opinion that almost all readers already agree with, 2) tells readers something they already know, or 3) offers an unexamined opinion.

A strong thesis argues a point readers can disagree with; it makes a claim. It creates tension and takes an assertive stand on the writer’s topic. A strong thesis rarely emerges on the first draft. Instead, a strong thesis results as you revise drafts, asking yourself questions about your topic in order to clarify your ideas. Because ideas develop as we write, during revision a writer will begin to see ways to strengthen the thesis so that it better reflects careful thinking and writing about the topic. Revising early thesis statements can also help a writer to narrow a topic and clarify audience and purpose.

To sharpen a working thesis throughout the writing process, question your thesis. The habit of challenging your own ideas by asking yourself questions helps you both develop (write more about) and analyze those ideas. Asking yourself questions about the words you choose to express your ideas (diction) can strengthen a working thesis.
Suggestions for Strengthening a Thesis

1. Use specific language.
Some working thesis statements offer only vague, general ideas, expressed in vague, general language. Begin revision by circling all generic words such as people, things, you, everyone, society. Substitute more specific words for the circled terms.

   Working thesis: You should treat people the same and not do things that favor one group over another.


Choosing specific words also establishes your credibility by letting readers know you have considered your topic and have something important to say about it.

   Revised thesis: Coaches should treat all team members equally and not favor one player over another.

Several words have been changed in this version: You/Coaches; people/team members; group/player. The new words are no longer vague and general.

However, this revised thesis still makes a fairly obvious claim that most readers will already agree with. As you draft and revise, questioning can help you narrow your thesis by addressing particular issues. Audience--what specific group of people are you talking to? Purpose--what do you want to teach those folks about your topic? Topic—Are you talking about coaches at the elementary, high school, college, or professional level? Continue asking questions: Why should coaches treat all team members fairly? What happens if they don’t? (Other team members feel left out. They think their contributions are not valued. They quit working hard.) If coaches have favorite players on the team, what does that favoritism do to team morale? (Morale suffers and players will not work together on the court to win.)

   Revised again: Basketball coaches should treat all team members equally and not favor one player over another because favoritism can damage team morale.

The questioning strategy helped this writer narrow her topic to a discussion of basketball coaching. Purpose and audience are more specific. She has narrowed the topic to focus on basketball coaches; clearly, the audience will be readers interested in basketball. She will discuss the damaging effects of favoritism on player morale with undergrads studying to become coaches. She may “tweak” the thesis even more as drafting continues, but this thesis is more specific. It gives readers a clearer idea of what the paper will be about. Most importantly, it gives this writer a clearer idea what specific points and particulars to include in the draft.

2. Clarify ideas.
Underline the words or ideas that should be explained or “unpacked” so readers understand your exact meaning. Ask yourself questions to help develop your ideas.

   Working thesis: American schools are in sad shape.
This writer probably knows what he means by “sad shape,” but the readers do not. He needs to “unpack” those words for readers, explaining and clarifying meaning: What does “sad shape” mean? That the buildings are in disrepair? That playground facilities are dangerous and outdated? That students don’t have access to computers? That students are not adequately prepared for college work? That fine arts programs have been eliminated?

America is full of all kinds of schools. What specific one(s) does he want to write about? Elementary? Middle school? High school? Magnet schools? Inner city schools? Parochial schools? Private schools? Suburban schools?

Revised thesis: Inner city high schools are not equipped with up-to-date computers.

3. Examine verbs.  
Check the verbs in your working thesis. Eliminate linking verbs (is, was, has been, should be, etc.) and avoid forms of to be (are, were, is, was, etc.) whenever possible and substitute strong action verbs. Ask yourself questions to better develop your ideas about your topic.

Working thesis: Inner city high schools are not equipped with up-to-date computers.

Linking verbs do exactly that – they link sentence parts together. They don’t do anything else. They don’t argue. They just say a situation exists. This writer’s thesis doesn’t take a stand on the use of up-to-date computers in high schools. Readers might respond to this unexamined opinion with “So what?” or “What’s your point?” Other readers might ask, “Where’s the tension?”

Are, a linking verb, is a clue that this writer needs to think more carefully about her topic. Asking herself questions can help this writer strengthen her thesis. Getting at some of the reasons behind this working statement can help:

Why do inner city schools lack up-to-date computers? Because parents don’t care? Because teachers lack training in computer instruction? Because Congress has cut aid to public schools? Because the city has cut property taxes?

What’s at stake if inner city students don’t get training on up-to-date computers? They’ll be seriously disadvantaged in college? They’ll not be prepared for jobs that require computer literacy?

Revised thesis: Inner city schools without up-to-date computer labs fail to prepare students for college and the work place in a world increasingly dependent on computer literacy.

4. Qualify language.  
Check your thesis for broad, sweeping claims; statements like these are difficult to support. Limit or qualify the language of your thesis.

Working thesis: IUPUI students come to campus for classes and are not interested in campus activities.
While the word *all* is not included in the thesis, it is implied: *[All] IUPUI students* . . . . However, this writer’s claim is not true of *all* IUPUI students. Many of them are deeply involved in campus organizations or hold jobs on campus that involve them in the life of the university. If the thesis is qualified to include “Some IUPUI students” or “IUPUI students who juggle full-time work and family responsibilities,” this student’s thesis becomes stronger and more accurate.

To say all 26,000 IUPUI students “aren’t interested” oversteps this writer’s claim too. “*Usually are not interested in participating in campus activities*” or “*seldom have time for campus organizations*” is more accurate.

**Revised thesis:** Returning IUPUI students come to campus for classes, but because they juggle work and family commitments, seldom have time for campus organizations.