Getting an A on an English Paper

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The Thesis

A good thesis is:

- *Argumentative.* It makes a case. That's the biggest difference between a *thesis* and a *topic* — a topic is something like "Slavery in *Huck Finn*." That's not a case, only a general area. A *thesis*, on the other hand, makes a specific case, it tries to prove something. One way to tell a thesis from a topic: if it doesn't have an active verb, it's almost certainly still a topic.

- *Controversial.* That doesn't mean something like "Abortionists should be shot" or "George W. Bush's election was illegitimate" — it means that it has to be possible for an intelligent person to *disagree* with your thesis. If everyone agrees on first sight, your thesis is too obvious, and not worth writing about. It also has to be something you can reasonably argue about: it's not enough merely to give an unsupported opinion.

- *Analytical, not evaluative.* A college English paper isn't the place to praise or blame works of literature: theses like "*Paradise Lost* is an enduring expression of the human spirit" or "*The Sound and the Fury* isn't successful in its choice of narrative techniques" aren't appropriate. That's the business of book reviewers. No need to give thumbs-up or thumbs-down; evaluate the work on its own terms.

- *About the readings, not the real world*. Never forget that books are books and, if you're in an English class, you're being asked to talk about *them*. Many books are unreliable guides to the real world outside the texts, and it's dangerous to talk

about, say, Renaissance attitudes toward race based only on your reading of *Othello*. Talk about *Othello*.

- *Specific*. It's not enough to deal in vague **generalities**. Some students want to write their paper on man and God, or on the black experience in the twentieth century. Both are far too nebulous to produce a good paper. Get your hands dirty with the text.

- *Well supported*. That's the key to the rest of the paper after those first few paragraphs.

The thesis statement should appear very close to the **beginning** of the paper. Some professors want it in a specific place — often the last sentence of the first paragraph. That's as good a position as any, but I prefer not to be rigidly **formulaic** in such matters. In any case, though, the thesis statement should be very near the beginning (in the first paragraph or two).

Note, though, that just because the thesis should be at the beginning of the reader's experience, it rarely comes at the beginning of the writer's experience. My pals Jeannine DeLombard and Dan White offer this "important hint" for constructing a thesis:

> You do not need a refined thesis in order to start writing. If you begin with a *provisional* thesis and then do good and careful close readings, you will often find a version of your final thesis in the *last paragraph of a first draft*. Integrate that version into your first paragraph and revise from there. Do not worry too much about your thesis, therefore, until *after* you've written out your close readings! A good final thesis should *emerge from*, not precede, your analyses. ("**Papers: Expectations, Guidelines, Advice, and Grading**")

Of course you have to know exactly what you're saying by the time you finish, but don't let that stop you from beginning to write. The fear of the blank screen — think of the old movie cliché of the would-be writer with the trashcan overflowing with crumpled paper — paralyzes too many people. Theses don't spring into being in their final form.

> *An insight into how professors **assign grades**: I usually have a good idea of what a paper's going to get by the time I finished the first page. If you give me a solid thesis*

*right up front, you've probably earned at least a B-plus.
Use the beginning of your paper wisely!*

See examples of both **good** and **bad** theses.

Links

There are plenty of good resources that cover similar turf. Here are a bunch by friends and colleagues: I can vouch for all of them. Read 'em several times each.

- **Five Ways of Looking at a Thesis** by Erik Simpson

- **Writing a Thesis** by Michael Barsanti

- **How to Be Original**, also by Michael Barsanti

- **Thesis and Introduction Worksheet** by Katherine Milligan

- **The Thesis Statement** by Sam Choi

- **Papers: Expectations, Guidelines, Advice and Grading** by Jeannine DeLombard and Dan White. Includes much more than thesis statements: a very thorough guide, and worth getting to know well.

from Jack Lynch's guide,
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