Why are you Writing?

Advice for writing a thesis

Prepared by the American University Writing Center
What is a Thesis?

- **Your Thesis is the mission statement of your paper.**
  - What are you trying to prove or show with your paper?
  - Why is your paper important?
- **Your Thesis is the main point of your paper.**
  - What do you want to say/explain/explore in your paper?
Your college writing professor assigns a short research essay on a neighborhood in Washington DC.

You decide you want to write about Columbia Heights.

This topic is a good starting point, but you need to focus more.

You need to find an arguable thesis that is not too narrow, too broad or too obvious.
Your Thesis is an Argument

- “Columbia Heights is in the Northwest part of our nation’s capital.”
- This sentence is not a thesis. It is a true statement, but it is not arguable. It states a fact that no one can argue against.
Your Thesis is a Position

- You are presenting your opinion as a defensible argument.
- It needs to be something worth arguing.
- It is not just an observation.
- If there are no reasonable opposing views, your argument will not make a good thesis.
The Academic Context

- Your thesis does not exist in a vacuum. Other writers have most likely written about your topic, and you need to find the place for your argument in the framework and/or adds to the conversation.
- So you need to research and develop your position.
- Be aware of your audience: what do they already know and believe about the topic?
As you Draft your Thesis
Remember...

- Your thesis is not just a summary of every point in your paper. It is the mission statement for the paper.
- You want to prepare your reader for the rest of your paper.
- You have a unique perspective. Be sure your reader knows it.
Also Remember...

- You make a promise to your reader with your thesis.
- Your thesis explains your aim for your paper and tells your reader what to expect.
Narrow your Thesis

- You decide that the point of your paper is to examine how the history of Columbia Heights shows the American Dream.
- This is the thesis in the example essay:

  - Columbia Heights shows the American Dream through its history.
Unpack your Thesis

- Examine your thesis as you write your paper:
  - Columbia Heights shows the American Dream through its history.

- Ask Questions of your thesis:
  - How does a neighborhood, particularly Columbia Heights, show the American Dream?
  - Is it particular moments in its history that show the American Dream or its entire history? How does that work?
  - How is this neighborhood significant today?
  - Does this thesis accurately reflect the content of the paper?
Good and Bad in your Thesis
Columbia Heights shows the American Dream through its history.

Good Things

- Contains an idea
  - Looking at the history of a neighborhood is interesting.
- Leads to research about Columbia Heights

Bad Things

- Does not reflect what is in the paper
  - The paper discusses location and never discusses historical events.
- Is not clear
  - How does a neighborhood show the American Dream?
- Does not make a specific argument
Improve your Thesis

- **Columbia Heights shows the American Dream through its history.**

- **Consider a sentence like:** The history of Columbia Heights illustrates the American Dream because of the way citizens of the neighborhood improved with their own innovation and ingenuity.

- **This is more arguable because you could point to particular actions citizens improved the neighborhood and connect it to the American Dream.**
Tips to Remember

- You are not carving your paper into marble; it can be rewritten. Experiment. Your thesis may change during the writing process.
- Your job is to find the best way to have your paper fit your thesis.
- Your essay will be easier to write with a one-sentence thesis at the beginning, although that is not an unbreakable rule.
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