Teaching the Thesis
by Joyce Armstrong Carroll

Writing a good thesis provides a successful foundation for composing an essay. Teaching how to do that, however, is quite another matter. Teachers often say to students, “Find a thesis,” or “Get a thesis,” or “Bring in a thesis statement tomorrow,” as if students could order one like a pizza, command it like a pet pook, or grasp one out of thin air like a magician. Finding the genesis for a thesis is another article—this article only considers how to write one.

Identify and define the term
Students often exhibit confusion about the term “thesis.” This is understandable since some teachers call it the controlling idea, central idea, main idea, proposition, claim, declaration; others label it the assumption, hypothesis, postulation, supposition, even the view. So first identify and define.

Coming from the Latin and Greek, “thesis” literally means the act of placing or laying down; it means to position, to propose, or to claim. The thesis literally “lays down” the writer’s position at the outset of the paper so the reader has clear expectations about the paper’s purpose. Quite simply, the thesis is the writer’s promise to the reader. It focuses and controls the essay. Without a good solid thesis, any essay remains perilously close to becoming a mere jumble of random thoughts.

Importance of the thesis
Emphasizing the importance of the thesis helps students take seriously the crafting of it. The thesis is the main event around which everything revolves. It’s like the vow—the promise—at a wedding. The flowers, attire, decorations, cake, rings, gifts, music, and food, while contributing to the event, are secondary, even tertiary, to the vow. The thesis solidifies the point, the pith; everything else supports it. In short, because the thesis promises, it holds the power of the pith! (And no one likes a broken promise.)

Kenneth Bruffee validates the importance of the thesis this way: “Suppose a writer was told, after he had just finished writing a paper, ‘Save only one sentence—the sentence that says exactly what the paper says. Throw the rest away’” (A Short Course in Writing 1972, 43). That sentence would be the thesis sentence. So important is the thesis, it must be taught, modeled, studied, and practiced.

The ABCs of a good thesis
Before students begin grappling with thesis writing, they must understand its ABCs.

A—The thesis asserts. Students need to be secure in their theses. Those who equivocate usually don’t know much about the topic so they try to sound magnanimous. To be assertive, students need to get an angle on the topic, an aspect about which they feel confident. If preparing students for a test, suggest they take key words from prompts as nuggets to ease them into their CZ—their “confident zone.” Juxtapose wishy-washy, waffling statements:

▶ Sometimes some people, but not all people, want a dog or some kind of a pet, maybe a bird.
▶ I don’t know much about water skiing, but I think it is fun.

with examples of assertive statements:

▶ Pets make fine companions.
▶ Water skiing demands balance.

Model writing an assertive thesis. Think aloud as you work. Then ask students in small groups to write assertive statements about topics of interest. Display and discuss. Ask, “Does this writer sound secure?” “Is this thesis an assertion?”

B—The thesis writer must be an insider. Often students are asked to write their theses out of personal experiences. Red flag! When students hear the word “personal,” they commence a personal narrative or a personal essay when the essay called for might be expository, persuasive, or analytic. Writing as an insider does not indicate a genre; it means choosing an angle as an expert about one particular
aspect of the topic. For example, if the prompt reads, “Convince your parents that sports are safe,” savvy writers choose a sport they know. One student may write about football safety helmets, another may choose soccer’s goal safety, a third may select field hockey’s eye goggles. Insider writing gives an essay edge because only insiders know those expert details that make an essay interesting. For example:

- Silky terriers make the best pets. (This student owns silky terriers.)
- Deep meanings reside in children’s fairy tales. (This student avidly reads fairy tales.)
- Texting while driving causes accidents. (This student experienced a T-bone accident because the other driver was texting.)

Model writing a thesis statement as an insider. Share and walk students through the process. Then students generate theses statements as insiders about one particular aspect of topics they know. Encourage them to share and discuss.

C—The thesis statement must be CLEAR. Ah! Illusive clarity. What sometimes seems clear to the writer may be muddled mush to the reader. Three problems contribute to unclear theses: profundity, incomprehensibility of expression, and vagueness.

Students often try to sound profound in their theses, but profundity lies not in the thesis but in the body of the paper, in its defense or support of the thesis. This attempt at a philosophical or penetrating thesis thwarts what should be a simple, straightforward, and knowledgeable assertion.

Incomprehensibility of expression in the thesis confuses the focus of the essay. The thesis should pop and crackle with precise word choice, not ambiguity. Remember: It’s a promise and no one likes an ambiguous promise.

When students don’t know the topic (for no one can write what they don’t know), they resort to machinations and shenanigans—such as vagueness. Typically, they write broad generalizations that promise nothing specific. Often students obfuscate with a thesaurus in one hand, pen in the other. By using “big” words, they reason, perhaps the reader won’t notice the vacuum of knowledge. Two other crutches are writing heavy-handedly, employing impossibly long clauses that wind in and around more convolutions, or repeating information that either says nothing or perplexes the reader. Sometimes these theses are so empty of meaning, the student could plug in most anything in “support.” But neophyte writers most commonly fall back on the ploy that attempts to disguise lack of knowing with pretend scholarship. “This is the unkindest cut of all,” Shakespeare says, because it insults the reader. Better to be authentically simple than pretentiously erudite.

Model writing clear theses. Talk about the process. Then invite students to try their hand at writing a clear thesis—one that is simple and straightforward. Share. Discuss what makes this difficult and what makes it easy.

THE TEN CRITERIA FOR A GOOD THESIS STATEMENT

(The examples below were taken from The New York Times Book Reviews from March 18, March 25, and April 1, 2012. Many were altered to make the point.)

1. Expresses the point of the paper
   Example: The Land of Decoration grabbed me by the throat.
   Explanation: This thesis asserts. The writer obviously read the book and clearly states what the review will explain.

2. Defensibility
   Example: Technology offers an optimistic take on the future.
   Explanation: The author promises to defend positive evidence for the future of technology.

3. Specificity
   Example: Peter Behrens’s novel The O’Briens follows the generations of an Irish family.
Explanation: This thesis gives the specificity of author and title with a clear statement that the book chronicles the lives of a family through time.

4. Conciseness
Example: Seventeen years ago, one terrible night changed everything.
Explanation: The thesis presents a concise invitation to read on to discover the events of that “one terrible night” and how it “changed everything.”

5. Contains strong verbs whenever possible
Example: Marina Warner pursues the enigmas of imaginative desire in “The Arabian Nights.”
Explanation: “Pursues” exudes power. Students should avoid “to be” verbs if possible and choose active, dynamic verbs. (This is a teachable moment for a lesson on verb choice.)

6. Makes a statement—a declarative sentence
Example: Repression comes at a high price.
Explanation: Specific, concise, straightforward, assertive and confident, this thesis promises an insider’s explanation of “repression” and what the author means by “a high price.”

7. Avoids bifurcation
Example: John Leonard championed women authors and writers of color.
Explanation: Bifurcation (students love the word and remember it because it sounds naughty) calls upon the author to defend, explain, or analyze two things: how Leonard championed “women authors” and then how he championed “writers of color.” Better, especially on tests, to take on one aspect—not two or three.

8. Does not give away the strategy
Example: A psychologist argues that people base decisions on moral intuition, not reason.
Explanation: Two problems occur here. The strategy of arguing is given. This is tantamount to the student saying, “I am going to persuade in favor of…” or “I am going to tell you about….” Rather, the strategy should become clear in the body of the essay. Second, a problem with bifurcation—what people base decisions upon and what they do not base decisions upon—could easily muddle a paper. Stick to one aspect.

9. Shun excessive wordiness
Example: Cristina García’s fiction—from her first novel Dreaming in Cuban through her fifth The Lady Matador’s Hotel—is known for traversing continents, cultures, and generations, and for telling the stories of families, friends, and strangers thrown together and torn apart in uncertain times.
Explanation: Most of what this thesis promises belongs in the body of the paper. A more concise thesis would be: Cristina García’s fiction tells the stories of families. Then in the exposition or analysis, the writer takes on “traversing continents, cultures, and generations” in several paragraphs, “friends and strangers” in a paragraph or two, and concludes with how all this is “thrown together and torn apart in uncertain times.” (This common mistake of students leaves them in a quandary about what to write when they get to the body of the paper because they feel they have already written it.)

10. Never asks a question
Example: What do philosophy and religion reveal about life?
Explanation: A thesis statement calls for a declaration, not an interrogation. Crafting the thesis as a question seems weaker, as if the writer can’t quite get started, isn’t confident, or vainly attempts to appeal to the reader. State the thesis confidently and then go forth to explain, persuade, or analyze.

In order to craft a sound thesis, students need exposure to these criteria (characteristics) of a good thesis. They need to:

- learn the criteria,
- see a model of how to analyze a couple of theses using that criteria,
- analyze theses independently through mentor texts, giving a thumbs-up for those that meet the criteria and revising those that don’t,
- practice revising theses using that criteria, and
- practice writing theses statements.

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