

Thesis

Interpretive versus Evaluative Claims

A thesis is to an essay what a theme is to a short story, play, or poem: it's the governing idea, proposition, claim, or point. Good theses come in many shapes and sizes. A thesis cannot always be conveyed in one sentence, nor will it always appear in the same place in every essay. But you will risk both appearing confused and confusing the reader if you can't state the thesis in one to three sentences or if the thesis doesn't appear somewhere in your introduction, usually near its end.

Regardless of its length or location, a thesis must be debatable—a claim that all readers won't automatically accept. It's a proposition that *can* be proven with evidence from the text. Yet it's one that *has* to be proven, that isn't obviously true or factual, that must be supported with evidence in order to be fully understood or accepted by the reader. The following examples juxtapose a series of inarguable topics or fact statements—ones that are merely factual or descriptive—with thesis statements, each of which makes a debatable claim about the topic or fact:

TOPIC OR FACT STATEMENTS	THESIS STATEMENTS
"The Story of an Hour" explores the topic of marriage.	In "The Story of an Hour," Chopin poses a troubling question: Does marriage inevitably encourage people to "impose [their] private will upon a fellow-creature" (537)?
"The Blind Man," "Cathedral," and "The Lame Shall Enter First" all feature characters with physical handicaps.	"The Blind Man," "Cathedral," and "The Lame Shall Enter First" feature protagonists who learn about their own emotional or spiritual shortcomings through an encounter with a physically handicapped person. In this way, all three stories invite us to question traditional definitions of "disability."
The experience of the speaker in "How I Discovered Poetry" is very ambiguous.	In "How I Discovered Poetry," what the speaker discovers is the ambiguous power of words—their capacity both to inspire and unite and to denigrate and divide.
"London" consists of three discrete stanzas that each end with a period; two-thirds of formal techniques the lines are end-stopped.	In "London," William Blake uses a variety of to suggest the unnatural rigidity and constraints of urban life.
<i>A Streetcar Named Desire</i> uses a lot of Darwinian language.	<i>A Streetcar Named Desire</i> asks whether or not it is truly the "fittest" who "survive" in contemporary America.

Creon and Antigone are both similar and different.

Creon and Antigone are alike in several ways, especially the inconsistency of their values and the way they are driven by passion below the surface of rational argument. Both are also one-sided in their commitments.... This does not mean, however, that they are equally limited in the values to which they adhere.

All of the thesis statements above are arguable, but they share other traits as well. All are clear and emphatic. Each implicitly answers a compelling interpretive question—for instance, *What do Antigone and Creon stand for? Which character and worldview, if any, does the play as a whole ultimately champion?* Yet each statement entices us to read further by generating more questions in our minds—*How and why do Creon and Antigone demonstrate "inconsistency" and "one-sidedness"? If these two characters are not equally limited, which of them is more limited?* An effective thesis enables the reader to enter the essay with a clear sense of what its writer will try to prove, and it inspires the reader with the desire to see the writer do it. We want to understand how the writer arrived at this view, to test whether it's valid, and to see how the writer will answer the other questions the thesis has generated in our minds. A good thesis captures the reader's interest and shapes his or her expectations. It also makes promises that the rest of the essay should fulfill.

At the same time, an arguable claim is not one-sided or narrow-minded. A thesis needs to stake out a position, but a position can and should admit complexity. Literary texts tend to focus more on exploring problems, conflicts, and questions than on offering solutions, resolutions, and answers. Their goal is to complicate, not simplify, our way of looking at the world. The best essays about literature and the theses that drive them often share a similar quality.

Interpretive versus Evaluative Claims

All the theses in the previous examples involve *interpretive* claims—claims about how a literary text works, what it says, how one should understand it. And interpretive claims generally work best as theses.

Yet it's useful to remember that in reading and writing about literature we often make (and debate) a different type of claim—the *evaluative*. Evaluation entails judging or assessing. Evaluative claims about literature tend to be of two kinds. The first involves aesthetic judgment, the question being whether a text (or a part or element thereof) succeeds in artistic terms. (This kind of claim features prominently in book reviews, for example.) The second involves philosophical, ethical, or even socially or politically based judgment, the question being whether an idea or action is wise or good, valid or admirable. All interpretive and evaluative claims involve informed opinion (which is why they are debatable). But whereas interpretive claims aim to elucidate the opinions expressed *in* and *by* the text, the second kind of evaluative claim assesses the value or validity of those opinions, often by comparing them with the writer's own.

The following examples juxtapose a series of interpretive claims with evaluative claims of both types:

INTERPRETIVE CLAIMS	EVALUATIVE CLAIMS
"A Conversation with My Father" explores the relative values of realistic and fantastic fiction.	"A Conversation with My Father" fails because it ends up being more a stilted Platonic dialogue

<p>Rather than advocating one type of fiction, however, the story ends up affirming just how much we need stories of any and every kind.</p>	<p>about works of fiction than a true work of fiction in its own right.</p> <p>The father in "A Conversation with My Father" is absolutely right: realistic stories are more effective and satisfying than fantastic ones.</p>
<p>The speaker of John Donne's "Song" is an angry and disillusioned man obsessed with the infidelity of women.</p>	<p>In "Song," John Donne does a very effective job of characterizing the speaker, an angry and disillusioned man obsessed with the infidelity of women.</p> <p>John Donne's "Song" is a horribly misogynistic poem because it ends up endorsing the idea that women are incapable of fidelity.</p>
<p>"How I Learned to Drive" demonstrates that, in Paula Vogel's words, "it takes a whole village to molest a child."</p>	<p>"How I Learned to Drive" is at once too preachy and too self-consciously theatrical to be dramatically effective.</p> <p>By insisting that sexual abuse is a crime perpetrated by a "whole village" rather than by an individual, Paula Vogel lets individual abusers off the hook, encouraging us to see them as victims rather than as the villains they really are.</p>

In practice, the line between these different types of claims can become very thin. For instance, an essay claiming that Vogel's play conveys a socially dangerous or morally bad message about abuse may also claim that it is, as a result, an aesthetically flawed play. Further, an essay defending an interpretive claim about a text implies that it is at least aesthetically or philosophically worthy enough to merit interpretation. Conversely, defending and developing an evaluative claim about a text always requires a certain amount of interpretation. (You have to figure out what the text says in order to figure out whether the text says it well or says something worthwhile.)

To some extent, then, the distinctions are ones of emphasis. But they are important nonetheless. And unless instructed otherwise, you should generally make your thesis an interpretive claim, reserving evaluative claims for conclusions.