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**Thesis**

For your first 2 papers, please underline your thesis sentence or sentence cluster. This will help both you and me focus on making your thesis as lucid and forceful as possible. What makes for a good thesis? Here are 4 rules of thumb:

**1. A thesis is an interpretive statement. It is not a fact.**

Fact: “Perrault’s *Cinderella* is about a young woman who is treated cruelly by her step-mother and then helped by her fairy godmother to attend the Prince’s ball.”

This is a summary of the story. There is no interpretive idea at work here.

Interpretive statement: “Perrault’s *Cinderella* concerns the transformation of a girl who is oppressed by her wicked stepmother. The girl uses both her wits and her fairy godmother’s magic powers to regain her rightful place as a marriageable daughter.”

**2. A thesis is specific in scope. It must be specific to be provable.**  **It should be capable of being developed in constituent parts.**

A vague thesis: “The Grimms’ *Ashputtle* is very violent.”

A specific thesis: “The Grimms’ *Ashputtle* stages violence against both Ashputtle and her stepsisters. The violent physical abuse goes hand in hand with sustained emotional abuse.”

This revised thesis immediately gives the reader a sense of how the writer is going to organize the argument. From this thesis, the reader has a sense that there will be a section on the violent physical abuse against all three daughters and another on the subtle forms of emotional abuse against them. It might also include a section contrasting the forms of violence used against Cinderella and the stepsisters or a section on the relationship between physical and emotional abuse. It might also take up the question of who is responsible for the various forms of abuse.

**3. A thesis is concise.** If you require an entire page to spell out your thesis, your thesis requires further work. A thesis normally can be expressed in 1-3 sentences. These sentences form your thesis statement or paragraph.

Note: in high school, some of you were probably told that a thesis should be a single sentence and that it had to come at the end of the first paragraph of your essay. This is **not** an unbreakable rule, though it’s good advice. Better to have your thesis as several interconnected sentences than as one too-long, cumbersome sentence. However, at the college/university level, it’s OK to explore the possibility of several sentences being your “thesis.” It’s still a good idea to place the thesis or thesis sentence cluster in a very prominent place in your introductory paragraph, perhaps at the end. Sometimes the end of the paragraph will focus more on your method and organization that the rest of your paper will follow as it explores and develops your thesis. For an excellent example of a 3-sentence thesis that would work fine for a short paper, see example #4 below that also maps out a paper’s organization, the revised Cinderella thesis.

**4. A thesis should be interesting. It should be important. It should be provocative.** It should offer the reader an argument that leads to further ramifications or considerations. These deeper levels of meaning will enable you to write a conclusion that is more than a mere restatement of your thesis. Your conclusion will allow you to extend your thesis. Often, the easiest way to turn your thesis into an important, provocative argument is simply to make it more specific, more detailed:

A thesis which could be developed: “Cinderella is not as good as everyone thinks.”

This is definitely a good idea for a thesis. However, one could make this idea more specific:

Revised thesis: “Cinderella’s greatest virtue is not so much her goodness as her capacity for deceit. She cleverly deceives her stepmother and stepsisters to move from hearth servant to beauty of the ball. She also uses mystery and surprise to win over the Prince.”

This revised thesis can help you in a variety of ways. 1) It can help you organize your ideas into different sections for the body of your paper. This way you avoid repeating yourself or getting confused about what you want to say. 2) It can also make writing a conclusion much easier. What does the story suggest about Cinderella’s obvious and hidden virtues? What does it say about the relationship between goodness and deceit? What does it suggest about the relationship between role-playing and social power? What does it say about moving beyond the limitations of one’s childhood experience? These are all possible directions your conclusion could explore.

Note that the revised thesis above in topic 4, and the “specific” thesis given above in topic 2, both give the reader an accurate sense of some of the major sub-topics that will addressed by particular paragraphs or sections of your paper as you develop the thesis. In short, we get not just an interesting thesis, but a good road map to how your paper will proceed.

One final note and a question:

Your thesis should cover all of your paper, not part of it. **Sometimes in rethinking and revising your paper to improve it means that you also have to go back and revise your thesis.** This is a good thing. It’s rare to have your thesis or main idea 100% understood from the start. More normally, you start with the rough idea of what you want to prove, make discoveries in the course of examining evidence carefully and writing the paper, then need to go back and change the thesis now that you have a clearer idea of what your paper is actually doing.

**What’s the difference between a hypothesis and a thesis?** My teachers never explained this to me. Hypothesis (Greek) = basis, supposition or assumption; hypo = “under”: therefore a hypothesis contains assumptions and claims that your paper will explore and *test*. You begin with a hypothesis. After testing and perhaps revision, it can now become your thesis—a hypothesis that’s survived testing and been improved and refined (and sometimes, radically revised). Your paper presents a tested thesis, but it began as a hypothesis and the paper itself should recreate for the reader the dramatic process of exploring, developing, and testing that the hypothesis went through.