

## “ON THE THESIS STATEMENT”<sup>1</sup>

A **thesis** states the main idea of your essay. Most kinds of college writing contains a thesis statement, often near the beginning of the essay, which functions as a promise to the readers –to let them know what will be discussed. It is, in effect, a contract you make with your reader. This contract might be set out in one sentence or several.

Though you will probably not have a finished thesis when you begin to write, you should establish a tentative **working thesis** early in your writing process. The word **working** is important here, as the working thesis may well be modified, clarified, or otherwise changed as you write. In spite of the fact that it will probably change, a working thesis is important for three reasons: 1) it directs your thinking, research, and investigation to keep you on track; 2) it helps you to focus on a particular point about the topic; 3) it provides concrete questions to ask about purpose and audience (helping you see, for example, what you must do to design a thesis for a particular audience).

A working thesis should have two parts: a **topic part**, which contains the carefully framed topic, and a **comment part**, which makes an important point about the topic. Here are some examples:

[TOPIC] Recent studies of depression [COMMENT] suggest that it is much more closely related to physiology than scientists had previously thought.

[TOPIC} The on-going American farm crisis [COMMENT} can be traced to three major causes: narrowing of crop stock available to farmers, feedlot/corporate farming, and closed international markets.

A successful working thesis has **three major characteristics**. It should offer an **interesting** topic to your intended audience. In its language, it should be as **specific** as possible in setting out both topic and comment. And in its scope, the topic must be limited enough and the comment focused enough to make the thesis **manageable**.

You can evaluate a working thesis by checking it against each of these criteria, as with this preliminary working thesis:

---

<sup>1</sup> Paul Baepler. 2001. *Creating Engaging 'Research' Assignments*. pp. 11-12

The theory of nuclear winter' is being debated around the globe.

**Interest:** The topic itself holds interest, but seems to have no real comment attached to it. The thesis merely states a bare fact, and there seems no place to go from here except to more bare facts.

**Specificity:** The thesis is fairly clear, but not very specific. Who is debating the theory? What does it mean to these people? What are the larger implications of this debate? What does the writer think of the theory, or the debate?

**Manageability:** The thesis is not manageable. It would require research in many countries and in many languages and would be beyond the capacities and time limits of most students, if not all.

**Assessment:** The topic of this thesis is very general and needs to be narrowed by a workable comment before it will be useful. Right now the field of investigation is too large and vague.

After considering the four criteria, this preliminary thesis can be narrowed into the following working thesis:

Scientists from several different countries have challenged the "nuclear winter" theory and claimed that it is more propaganda than science.

As you review your own initial drafts of essays for this course, take time to locate your thesis statement, then review the sentences or sentences to identify:

- The topic
- The comment
- Terms and need more information
- Possible subtopics for the paper

Test the topic and comment you find with the criteria listed above. Consider whether to clarify terms and more clearly set subtopics as part of revising your thesis, or whether to cut some of the terms and limit the subtopics in order to get the heart of your thesis.