



## The Michael and Kathleen Clem History Writing Center

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### Writing an Argumentative Thesis

Drafting an argumentative thesis can be challenging, even for the most skilled historians. A strong thesis statement introduces your readers to the main points of an essay, lends your writing a logical structure, and demonstrates your ability to analyze—not merely describe—historical sources.

#### Descriptive Statements v. Argumentative Theses

The articles and monographs that historians write offer interpretations, not simply descriptions, of the past. They seek to explain *why* people acted the way they did in a given time period, not just what they did or who they were. This kind of project requires a historian to examine closely primary sources and scholarly publications so that they can bring together quotes and context in a unique way that helps their readers learn something new. When your history professors ask you to develop a thesis, they want you to practice crafting your own interpretations of the sources you read and discuss in class. While it may seem like a chore, writing a thesis is an opportunity to show your professor that you understand the course material and perhaps introduce them to an idea they never considered before.

Compare the two examples below, and note the differences between a descriptive statement and an argumentative thesis:

- Descriptive Statement: “In *Common Sense*, Thomas Paine presented his views on why the American colonists should break with Great Britain.”
- Argumentative Thesis: “Thomas Paine’s consistent use of plain language, biblical analogies, and egalitarian rhetoric helps explain why *Common Sense* appealed to American colonists seeking to break with Great Britain.”

The descriptive statement only tells us what Thomas Paine did; it does not explain the meaning or historical significance of his most famous work. In contrast, the argumentative thesis presents readers with three likely reasons why *Common Sense* was as popular as it was in revolutionary America. The thesis can be proven by combining examples from Paine’s pamphlet with historical context you learn in class, like the literacy levels or religiosity of colonists.

Additionally, the thesis acknowledges limitations to your analysis. Paine’s writing style is *one* reason why American colonists read *Common Sense* in droves, but perhaps not the only reason. Other kinds of historical evidence that could explain *Common Sense*’s popularity would be great contrary evidence to discuss in your paper.

## Tips and Tricks for Writing a Strong Argumentative Thesis

1. Keep the assignment's goals in mind as you analyze historical sources, lecture notes, secondary sources, and textbook chapters. That way, you can use the most pertinent evidence to craft your thesis. For example, if your professor wants an essay on immigrants' experiences in Gilded-Age New York City, you will want to privilege their perspectives in your thesis as opposed to those of immigrants from rural counties.
2. Before you write your thesis, outline the main points you want to make as well as key pieces of evidence. Consider how those pieces fit together. If an idea or a document sticks out as less relevant than the others, consider cutting it from your essay or think about additional documents and information that could supplement and strengthen the point.
3. If you are struggling to come up with a thesis, ask yourself the following: What is the main question that I am trying to answer in this essay? What is the one point that I want the reader to come away with after reading my paper? Answering these questions will focus your thoughts on the most important claims and evidence you want to feature in your paper.
4. Write your thesis to reflect the organization of your essay. A thesis presents the "so what," or main take away, of your paper and every paragraph should help prove it in some way. Use your thesis as a roadmap and include information in the body of the essay in the order it appears in your statement. This can improve the clarity of your essay and, as a result, make your claims more persuasive.
5. Format your thesis to fit the scope of the project. For smaller papers, a one- or two-sentence statement at the end of an introductory paragraph will sufficiently present your argument. For longer projects, such as an honors thesis, you may need an entire paragraph to list the interlocking claims that make up your argumentative thesis. Regardless, always position your thesis at the beginning of a paper. Your reader cannot follow a roadmap if they don't have it from the start.

**\*Note: It is common for a new thesis to emerge in the process of writing. A good writer will recognize this and make appropriate changes. More often than not, you will find that you best articulate your thesis as you draft your conclusion. If this is the case, you should move your new thesis to the introduction and re-write the introduction accordingly. You may find that reorganizing the essay and conclusion is necessary.**