

Working Thesis Statements

Ever spent an hour or more in Ingles, traversing the aisles multiple times—tomatillos, onions, cheese, soda, flan, ice cream, peppers, Maseca, beans—only to end up back in Produce to get the limes that tie the whole meal together? Chances are you arrived at the grocery without a well-organized list.

The working thesis is the grocery list of an academic essay. It's not essential, but it's a big help. And it's increasingly helpful the more complicated the essay you're preparing to create, the more sources, information, and connections you have to remember.

A working thesis not only helps you organize your paper; it helps you synthesize your research. That's because the process of writing one requires you to hone in on your essential findings as they relate to the larger field of study.

Starting your Working Thesis

You are ready to write a working thesis when you can make a *claim* or *argument* based on your research, the claim is sufficiently *specific* for the assignment and field, and the claim is *significant*—worthy of your readers' interest¹.

Imagine an assignment for an introductory sociology course on the media: “*In a 5-6 page essay, analyze a type of television program (e.g., local news, sitcom, medical drama, talk show) and its relationship to its viewership. What expectations does the audience bring to the show, and how, in turn, does the show influence certain beliefs of the audiences?*” Which of the following thesis statements do Booth et al. use as an exemplary working thesis, meeting the three criteria above?

1. Graphic reports of violence on local TV news lead regular viewers to overestimate both the rate of crime in their neighborhood and the personal danger to themselves and their families.
2. The attention to violence during local TV news programs mirrors the amount of violence in the broader media more than it does the amount of violence in our society.
3. Local TV news programs include, on average, three reports of violent crimes per episode; behind murder—the obvious frontrunner—reports of domestic violence are the second most common: a surprising and disturbing trend.

Example #2 makes a claim, but the claim lacks specificity due to vague phrases such as “broader media” and “our society.” Also, the claim does not respond in a significant way to the instructor's question about the relationship between the show and its audience.

Example #3 lists specific crimes and offers a potentially significant finding but only summarizes findings and does not make a claim.

Example #1 is the strongest. It gives a meaningful response to the instructor's question, narrows its focus to a small enough topic to cover in the paper, and makes a claim that the writer will need to support through evidence.

¹ Wayne C. Booth et al., *The Craft of Research* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 120.

Elaborating on your Working Thesis

Booth et al. suggest two more steps to construct a working thesis. Start with the statement you have after step 1. Add to the beginning a qualifying “although” clause to attend to opposing arguments, and add to the end a “because” clause to back up your claim. While you may cut this extra material in the final thesis, fleshing out these pieces at the working stage will give you a sound structure for your argument: “(1) *Although I acknowledge X*, (2) *I claim Y*, (3) *because of reason Z*”².

Although violent crime is actually decreasing, regular TV viewers overestimate their neighborhood crime rate by 150% and therefore misjudge personal danger to themselves and their families, **because local TV evening news regularly opens with graphic reports of mayhem and murder in familiar locations, making many believe that crime happens nightly outside their front door.**³

Finalizing the Content of your Thesis

As you finish your paper, return to your working thesis. Reassess, just as in the Ingles check-out line, you scan the cart and decide to put back the ice cream—you’re over budget and flan is creamy enough.

To check the strength of your thesis statement, see if you can answer *yes* to each of these questions:

- Does it present one claim among several or more possible claims? In other words, could someone else have constructed a different argument from this assignment and research material?
- Is it interesting to a reader who is knowledgeable in the field? If a reader’s first response on reading it is “Who cares?” you’ve failed this test.
- Does the essay support the thesis “specifically and without wandering”? If your thesis statement is too broad, here’s where you should discover that.⁴

Finalizing the Wording of your Thesis

If any sentence needs carefully chosen words, it’s your thesis. As you finalize the statement, replace vague words and phrases with more precise ones. Consider adding qualifiers (e.g., the data *suggests* rather than the data *shows*) to distinguish informed speculation from absolute facts.⁵

Look at these two examples for a biology paper on instances of locomotion in bivalve mollusks. Note the more specific phrases and effective qualifier (*may*) in the second one.

Okay: In this essay, I will argue that **evolutionary factors** brought about **adaptations** in *P. maximus* that make its swimming possible.

Better: In this essay, I will argue that swimming is made possible in *P. maximus* by a combination of unique **morphological and physiological adaptations**, and will then consider some of the **evolutionary pressures** that *may have selected* for these adaptations.⁶

² Ibid., 123.

³ Ibid., 123.

⁴ “Thesis Statements,” University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill Writing Center, October 2007. Available from <http://www.unc.edu/depts/wcweb/handouts/index.html>; Internet; accessed 19 April 2011.

⁵ Booth et al., *Craft*, 128-9.

⁶ Jan A. Pechenik. *A Short Guide to Writing about Biology*. (New York: Longman, 2010), 142.