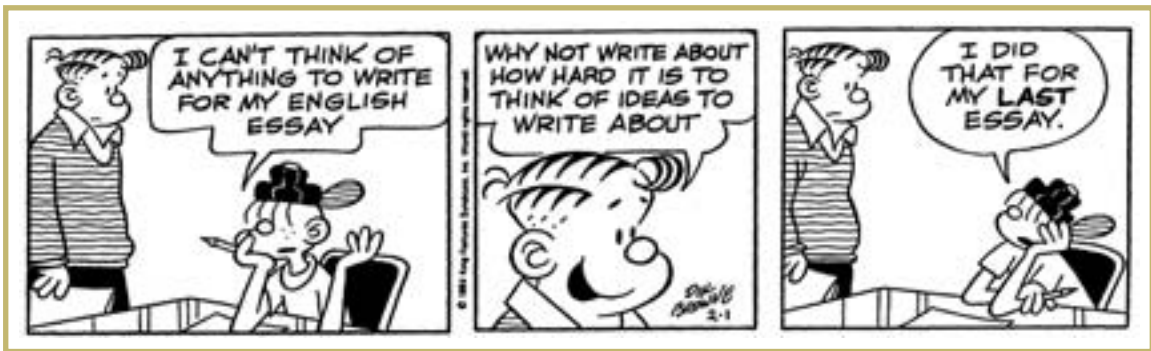


# Identifying a Thesis



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The process of prewriting—discovering a limited subject and generating ideas about it—prepares you for the next stage in writing an essay: identifying the paper’s *thesis*, or controlling idea.

## WHAT IS A THESIS?

Presenting your position on a subject, the **thesis** should focus on an interesting and significant issue, one that engages your energies and merits your consideration. You may think of the thesis as the essay’s hub—the central point around which all the other material revolves. Your thesis determines what does and does not belong in the essay. The thesis, especially when it occurs early in an essay, also helps focus the reader on the piece’s central point and thus helps you achieve your writing purpose.

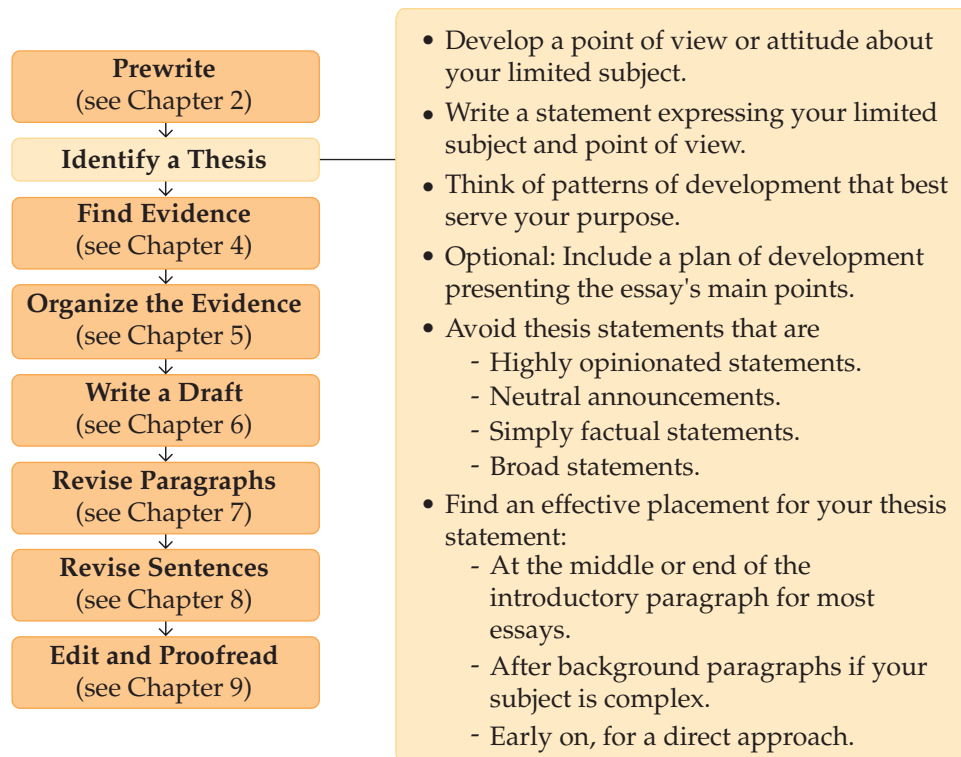
## FINDING A THESIS

Sometimes the thesis emerges early in the prewriting stage, particularly if a special angle on your limited topic sparks your interest or becomes readily apparent. Often, though, you'll need to do some work to determine your thesis. For some topics, you may need to do some library research. For other subjects, the best way to identify a promising thesis is to look through your prewriting and ask yourself questions like these: What statement does all this prewriting support? What aspect of the limited subject is covered in most detail? What is the focus of the most provocative material? (See Figure 3.1.)

For a look at the process of finding the thesis within prewriting material, glance back in Chapter 2 at the annotated brainstorming (pages 31–32) and the resulting scratch outline (page 33) that Harriet Davids prepared for her limited subject, “The special problems that parents face raising children today.” Harriet eventually devised the following thesis to capture the focus of her prewriting: “Being a



**FIGURE 3.1**  
**Process Diagram: Identifying a Thesis**



parent today is much more difficult than it was a generation ago.” (For more on how Harriet arrived at her thesis, see pages 41–42.)

Sometimes the thesis won’t be easy to pinpoint. Indeed, you may find that you need to refocus your thesis as you move through the stages of the writing process. To see how this progressive clarification might work, imagine you’re writing a paper about adjusting to the academic demands of college life. After looking over your prewriting, you might identify this preliminary thesis: “Many college students flounder during the first semester because they have trouble adjusting to the amount of work required by their professors.” However, once you start writing the essay, you might realize that students’ increased personal freedom, not their increased workload, is the primary problem. You would revise your thesis accordingly: “Many college students flounder the first semester because they become so distracted by new freedoms in their personal lives that they don’t give enough attention to academics.”

## WRITING AN EFFECTIVE THESIS

What makes a thesis effective? Generally expressed in one or two sentences, a thesis statement often has two parts. One part presents your paper’s *limited subject*; the other presents your *point of view*, or *attitude*, about that subject. Here are some examples of the way you might move from general subject to limited subject to thesis statement. In each thesis statement, the limited subject is underlined once and the attitude twice.

General Subject	Limited Subject	Thesis Statement
Education	Computers in elementary school arithmetic classes	<u>Computer programs in arithmetic can individualize instruction more effectively than the average elementary school teacher can.</u>
Transportation	A metropolitan transit system	<u>Although the city’s transit system still has problems, it has become safer and more efficient in the last two years.</u>
Work	College internships	<u>The college internship program has had positive consequences for students.</u>
Our anti-child world	Special problems that parents face raising children today	<u>Being a parent today is much more difficult than it was a generation ago.</u>

(*Reminder:* The last of these thesis statements is the one that Harriet Davids devised for the essay she planned to write in response to the assignment on page 17.

Harriet's prewriting appears on pages 17 and 24–28. You can find her first draft on pages 86–87.)

## Tone and Point of View

An effective thesis establishes a tone and point of view suitable for a given purpose and audience. If you're writing an essay arguing that multimedia equipment can never replace a live teacher in the classroom, you need to frame a thesis that matches your and your readers' concerns about the subject. Instead of breezily writing, "Parents, school boards, principals: ditch the boob tube and the cutesy interactive computer and put the bucks where it counts—in teachers," you would aim for a more thoughtful and serious tone: "Education won't be improved by purchasing more electronic teaching tools but by allocating more money to hire and develop good teachers."

## Implied Pattern of Development

On page 19, we show how an essay's purpose may suggest a pattern of development. In the same way, an effective thesis may point the way to a pattern of development that would be appropriate for developing the essay. Consider the thesis statements in the preceding list. The first thesis might use *comparison-contrast*; the second *illustration*; the third *cause-effect*; and the fourth *argumentation-persuasion*. (For more information about the relationship between an essay's purpose and its pattern of development, see the chart on pages 29–30.)

## Including a Plan of Development

Sometimes a thesis will include a **plan of development**: a concise *overview of the essay's main points in the exact order* in which those points will be discussed. To incorporate a plan of development into your thesis, use single words or brief phrases that convey—in a nutshell—your essay's key points; then add those summarized points to the end of the thesis, being sure to present them in the order they will appear in the essay. Note, for example, the way a plan of development (in italics) is included in the following thesis: "Baseball's inflated salaries hurt *the fans, the sport, and most of all, the athletes.*"

A thesis with a plan of development is an effective strategy for keeping readers focused on an essay's main points. If you decide to prepare such a thesis, be careful not to overload it with too much information. Rather than writing, "An after-school job can promote a sense of responsibility in young people, teach important human-relations skills, and create awareness of career options," tighten the plan of development so it reads more crisply: "An after-school job develops responsibility, human-relations skills, and an awareness of career options."

If the essay's key points resist your efforts to reduce them to crisp phrases, you can place the plan of development in a separate sentence, directly *after* the

thesis. Consider the plan of development (in italics) that comes after the following thesis: “Many parents have unrealistic expectations for their children. These parents want their children to *accept their values, follow their paths, and succeed where they have failed.*” Note that the points in a plan of development are expressed in grammatically parallel terms: The plan of development for the paper on baseball salaries contains nouns in series (“the fans,” “the sport,” “the athletes”), while the plan of development for the paper on parental expectations contains verb phrases (“accept their values,” “follow their paths,” “succeed where they have failed”).

Because preparing an effective thesis is such a critical step in writing a sharply focused essay, you need to avoid the following four common problems.

### 1. Don't Write a Highly Opinionated Statement

Although your thesis should express your attitude toward your subject, don't go overboard and write a dogmatic, overstated thesis: “With characteristic clumsiness, campus officials bumbled their way through the recent budget crisis.” A more moderate thesis can make the same point, *without alienating readers*: “Campus officials had trouble managing the recent budget crisis effectively.”

### 2. Don't Make an Announcement

Some writers use the thesis statement merely to announce the limited subject of their paper and forget to indicate their attitude toward the subject. Such statements are announcements of intent, not thesis statements.

Compare the following three announcements with the thesis statements beside them:

#### Announcement

My essay will discuss whether a student pub should exist on campus.

Handgun legislation will be the subject of my paper.

I want to discuss cable television.

#### Thesis Statement

This college should not allow a student pub on campus.

Banning handguns is the first step toward controlling crime in America.

Cable television has not delivered on its promise to provide an alternative to network programming.

### 3. Don't Make a Factual Statement

Your thesis and thus your essay should focus on an issue capable of being developed. If a fact is used as a thesis, you have no place to go; a fact generally doesn't invite much discussion.

Notice the difference between the following factual statements and thesis statements:

#### Factual Statement

Many businesses pollute the environment.

Movies nowadays are often violent.

America's population is growing older.

#### Thesis Statement

Tax penalties should be levied against businesses that pollute the environment.

Movie violence provides a healthy outlet for aggression.

The aging of the American population will eventually create a crisis in the delivery of health-care services.

## 4. Don't Make a Broad Statement

Avoid stating your thesis in vague, general, or sweeping terms. Broad statements make it difficult for readers to grasp your essay's point. Moreover, if you start with a broad thesis, you're saddled with the impossible task of trying to develop a book-length idea in an essay that runs only several pages.

The following examples contrast thesis statements that are too broad with effectively focused statements:

#### Broad Statement

Nowadays, high school education is often meaningless.

Newspapers cater to the taste of the American public.

The computer revolution is not all that we have been led to believe it is.

#### Thesis Statement

High school diplomas have been devalued by grade inflation.

The success of *USA Today* indicates that people want newspapers that are easy to read and entertaining.

Home computers are still an impractical purchase for many people.

## ARRIVING AT AN EFFECTIVE THESIS

On pages 36–37, we discussed the basic process for finding a thesis; we also pointed out how Harriet Davids—after reviewing her prewriting—identified her paper's thesis: "Being a parent today is much more difficult than it was a generation ago." But Harriet didn't discover her thesis immediately; she went through several stages before she came up with the final wording. The following paragraph describes the steps Harriet took when formulating her essay's central point. In all likelihood, you too will need to experiment a bit before arriving at an effective thesis.

Starting with her limited subject ("The special problems that parents face raising children today"), Harriet at first worded her thesis to read, "My essay will show that



raising children today is a horror show compared to how it was when my parents raised me.” As soon as she read what she had written, Harriet saw that she had prepared an *announcement* rather than a thesis. Rephrasing the statement to do away with the announcement, she next wrote, “Raising children today is a horror show compared to how it was when my parents raised me.” When Harriet read this version out loud, she was pleased to hear that the rewording eliminated the announcement—but she was surprised to discover that the rephrasing highlighted two problems she hadn’t detected earlier. For one thing, her statement was *highly opinionated* and *slangy* (“horror show”). Second, the statement *misrepresented* what she intended to do by suggesting—incorrectly—that she was going to (1) discuss the child-rearing process and (2) contrast her parents’ and her own child-raising experiences. She planned to do neither. Instead, she intended to (1) emphasize parenthood’s challenges and (2) address—in a general way—the difference between parenting today and parenting years ago. So, recasting her statement one more time to eliminate these problems, Harriet arrived at the final wording of her thesis: “Being a parent today is much more difficult than it was a generation ago.”

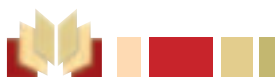
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on page 49

## PLACING THE THESIS IN AN ESSAY

The thesis is often located in the middle or at the end of the introduction. But considerations about audience, purpose, and tone should always guide your decision about its placement. You may, for example, choose to delay the thesis if you feel that background information needs to be provided before readers can fully understand your key point—especially if the concept is complex and best taken in slowly. Similarly, if you sense your audience is resistant to your thesis, you may choose to lead readers to it gradually. Conversely, if you feel that readers would appreciate a direct, forthright approach, you might place the thesis early in the essay—perhaps even at the very beginning of the introduction.

Sometimes the thesis is reiterated—using fresh words—in the essay’s conclusion or elsewhere. If done well, this repetition keeps readers focused on the essay’s key point. You may even leave the thesis implied, relying on strong support, tone, and style to convey the essay’s central idea.

One final point: Once you start writing your first draft, some feelings, thoughts, and examples may emerge that modify, even contradict, your initial thesis. Don’t resist these new ideas. Keep them in mind as you revise the thesis and—in the process—move toward a more valid and richer view of your subject.



### ACTIVITIES: IDENTIFYING A THESIS

1. For each of the following limited subjects, four possible thesis statements are given. Indicate whether each thesis is an announcement (A), a factual statement (FS), too broad a statement (TB), or an acceptable thesis (OK).

Revise the flawed statements. Then, for each effective thesis statement, identify a possible purpose, audience, tone, and point of view.

- a. *Limited subject*: The ethics of treating severely disabled infants
    - Some babies born with severe disabilities have been allowed to die.
    - There are many serious issues involved in the treatment of newborns with disabilities.
    - The government should pass legislation requiring medical treatment for newborns with disabilities.
    - This essay will analyze the controversy surrounding the treatment of severely disabled babies who would die without medical care.
  - b. *Limited subject*: Privacy and computerized records
    - Computers raise some significant questions for all of us.
    - Computerized records keep track of consumer spending habits, credit records, travel patterns, and other personal information.
    - Computerized records have turned our private lives into public property.
    - In this paper, the relationship between computerized records and the right to privacy will be discussed.
2. Turn back to activity 5 on page 34. For each set of limited subjects listed there, develop an effective thesis. Select *one* of the thesis statements. Then, keeping in mind the purpose indicated and the pattern of development you identified earlier, draft a paragraph developing the point expressed in the thesis. (Save the paragraph so you can work with it further after reading the next chapter.)
  3. Following are four pairs of general and limited subjects. Generate an appropriate thesis for each pair. Select one of the thesis statements, and determine which pattern of development would support the thesis most effectively. Use that pattern to draft a paragraph developing the thesis. (Save the paragraph so you can work with it further after reading the next chapter.)

**General Subject**

Psychology  
Health  
The elderly  
Work

**Limited Subject**

The power struggles in a classroom  
Doctors' attitudes toward patients  
Television's depiction of the elderly  
Minimum-wage jobs for young people

4. Each set that follows lists the key points for an essay. Based on the information provided, prepare a possible thesis for each essay. Then propose a possible purpose, audience, tone, and point of view.

**Set A**

- One evidence of this growing conservatism is the re-emerging popularity of fraternities and sororities.
- Beauty contests, ROTC training, and corporate recruiting—once rejected by students on many campuses—are again popular.



- Most important, many students no longer choose possibly risky careers that enable them to contribute to society but instead select safe fields with money-making potential.

### Set B

- We do not know how engineering new forms of life might affect the earth's delicate ecological balance.
  - Another danger of genetic research is its potential for unleashing new forms of disease.
  - Even beneficial attempts to eliminate genetic defects could contribute to the dangerous idea that only perfect individuals are entitled to live.
5. Keep a journal for several weeks. Then reread a number of entries, identifying two or three recurring themes or subjects. Narrow the subjects and, for each one, generate possible thesis statements. Finally, using an appropriate pattern of development, draft a paragraph for one of the thesis statements. (Save the paragraph so you can work with it further after reading the next chapter.)
  6. Select a broad topic—either your own or one of the following: animals, popularity, the homeless, money, fashion trends, race relations, parties. Working with a partner, use a prewriting technique to narrow the topic so that it's suitable for an essay of two to five typed pages. Using another prewriting strategy, generate details on the limited topic. Next, examine the material and identify at least two possible thesis statements. Then, for each thesis, reshape your prewriting, determining which items are appropriate, which are not, and where more material is needed.
  7. Return to the scratch outline you prepared in response to activity 7 on page 35. After examining the outline, identify a thesis that conveys the central idea behind most of the raw material. Then, ask others to evaluate your thesis in light of the material in your scratch outline. Finally, keeping the thesis—as well as your purpose, audience, and tone—in mind, refine the scratch outline by deleting inappropriate items, adding relevant ones, and indicating where more material is needed. (Save your refined scratch outline and thesis so you can work with them further after reading the next chapter.)

For additional writing, reading, and research resources, go to [www.mycomplab.com](http://www.mycomplab.com) and choose **Nadell/Langan/Comodromos' *The Longman Writer*, 7/e.**