

Writing a Literary Thesis

Definition:

A thesis is your contract with the reader to become engaged and accept or listen to your argument. In return, you promise to stay within the limits of the subject, to develop your subject clearly and sufficiently, and to communicate your intentions in full to your reader. It must be:



1. A thesis **MUST** be arguable, provable and worth proving.

Arguable – Could someone reasonably argue the opposing viewpoint?

Provable – Is there valid evidence to support your position?

Worth proving – Does it add something new to the reader’s understanding of the issue? Does it pass the “so what?” test?

2. **A thesis says something a little strange. It is NOT obvious.**

- a. By telling the story of Katniss’ life choices, *The Hunger Games* demonstrates the importance of her rebellion.
- b. In *The Hunger Games* Peeta Melark’s kindness is a real danger to heroine Katniss Everdeen and is one of the main antagonists in the film.

Both of these statements, I would contend, are perfectly correct. Only the second one says something, well, weird. Weird is good. Sentence a. encourages the writer to produce precisely the evidence that everybody **usually** talks about in *The Hunger Games*; sentence b. ensures that the writer will talk about something **insightful** or **unique**.

Many good papers start by pointing out something that seems not to make sense and then making sense of it. Consider arguing the opposite of your first idea. The technical term for this is **Antithetical Metacognition**. **Caution:** Be sure that you can still find evidence from the story to support the opposite idea.

3. Test your thesis using the **MTS** (Magical Thesis Statement) **test**. If you can complete the following statement, your thesis will likely present an insightful idea. **Note:** This is not the actual wording **of** your thesis. It is a test **for** your thesis.

By looking at _____, readers can see _____, which most readers don’t see. This is important because _____.

Ex.

By looking at Peeta’s kindness, readers can see that it creates a problem for Katniss at the beginning of the story but ultimately helps her to realize that success will come from letting people into her life to help her. She cannot shut off her humanity if she expects to lead a rebellion against the Capitol, which most readers don’t see. This is important because most people assume that kindness is a good thing. Looking at the impact of kindness on an emotionally-closed person can show a reader an unusual or different perspective about the story.

4. **A thesis says something about the text(s) you discuss *exclusively*. It cannot be applied to all texts – that would make it too ordinary and bland.**

Back to the first example. Try substituting other works:

- a. By telling the story of Katniss' life choices, *The Hunger Games* demonstrates the importance of her rebellion.
- a. By telling the story of Ren McCormack's life choices, *Footloose* demonstrates the importance of his rebellion.

It works. Bad sign. Too ordinary.

- b. In *The Hunger Games* Peeta Mellark's kindness is a real danger to heroine Katniss Everdeen and is one of the main antagonists in the film.
- b. In *Footloose* Ariel's kindness is a real danger to hero Ren McCormack and is one of the main antagonists in the film.

Um, nope. Doesn't work. Good sign.

5. **A thesis makes a lot of information irrelevant.**

One more time (so sue me, I like this example):

- a. By telling the story of Katniss' life choices, *The Hunger Games* demonstrates the importance of her rebellion.

A plot summary of *The Hunger Games* would support this thesis. Bad sign. A strong thesis excludes most of the text in order to make a specific claim.

- b. In *The Hunger Games* Peeta Mellark's kindness is a real danger to heroine Katniss Everdeen and is one of the main antagonists in the film.

This excludes parts of the text. Good sign. Your reader knows precisely which parts of it you'll be talking about and why.

6. **Finally:**

- a. Write your thesis as a statement. Never phrase the thesis as a question.

The Quality of a Thesis (based on the story of the Three Little Pigs)

The quality of your thesis depends on the depth of your analysis.

1. Weak Thesis

The three little pigs are victims of the wolf's aggression.

- This observation is obvious, almost a fact.
- There is very little to prove.
- The word "victim" is the only word that has an element of arguability.
- It does not pass the "so what?" test; it does not add anything new to the reader's understanding of the issue or the story.
- The content used in the proof will largely be plot summary.

2. Average Thesis

The wolf's aggression caused undeserved hardship for the pigs.

- This statement presents somewhat of an argument but there is a limit to what you can analyze.
- Here you have to prove that the pigs didn't deserve the wolf's aggression.
- You could analyze what is fair and reasonable for the pigs to expect as far as their personal safety is concerned.
- You could analyze what is unfair and unreasonable about the wolf's behaviour.
- It offers some insight into the plight of the pigs.

3. Strong Thesis

It is not the wolf who is responsible for the destruction of the pigs' homes and lifestyle; it is the pigs themselves who must bear responsibility.

- This interpretation is quite arguable. Someone else might contend that the wolf is solely responsible for the outcome of the situation.
- More analysis is required to come to this conclusion.
- Many details in the story (and possibly research into the natural instincts of wolves!) would be required to develop your proofs.
- It is very unlikely plot summarizing will occur.
- It is a more original perspective; therefore, more interesting. It offers the reader a new way of looking at a piece of literature.