

From Topic to Thesis

A well-constructed thesis helps hold an essay together by showing the reader where the paper is going to go. It defines not just a paper's topic but its argument, and it introduces the kinds of evidence or mode of reasoning that will be used to back up that argument. It does not merely summarize the points that will be made; rather, it shows the relationship between those points. A thesis may need to be more than one sentence long in order to do all these things; it may turn out to be a thesis *cluster* rather than a thesis *statement*.

As we all know, “construct an argument” is easier said than done. Many less-successful papers merely *describe* texts in the introduction rather than articulating a specific thesis that makes a claim about those texts. Sometimes the introduction simply hasn't foregrounded an argument that shows up later in the paper. Sometimes the paper makes several good individual points without figuring out the relationship between those points, so that the thesis is more like a list than an argument.

In order for us to examine what an argument actually looks like and think about some ways we can push on a topic to get to one, I'm providing a couple of essay prompts and a series of increasingly specific thesis statements or clusters (based on past student essays) responding to the prompts. I've included some commentary on each sample thesis so you can see the kinds of questions (mostly “why?” and “how?”) I ask when I'm reading.

Assignment: Write a paper in which you discuss the inclusion of personal experience in persuasive writing. Analyze the value, drawbacks, implications, or significance of using personal experience in writing; present your conclusions in the form of an argument supported by evidence.

This paper will discuss the value of personal experience in persuasive writing.

This sentence isn't a thesis; it's a restatement of the assignment. The thesis needs to make a claim, to state something specific and debatable.

Using personal experience is often frowned upon, but it can be useful.

This sentence is at least a beginner's thesis: instead of just stating a topic (“the value of personal experience”) it's making a specific claim (“personal experience can be useful”). But I want to know: how can personal experience be useful? And if it's so useful, why is it frowned upon?

Using personal experience can easily become superfluous or can be detrimental to one's arguments; however, it can also add to the rhetorical persuasiveness of the paper.

This version of the thesis is longer and more elaborate (and it's got a semicolon!), but it's not actually a whole lot more specific. Why exactly might using personal experience be detrimental? How might it make a paper more rhetorically persuasive?

Although using personal experience can undermine one's arguments by making them sound like simple rhetoric and therefore making the reader more skeptical, personal experience can also introduce and justify perspectives, serve as background or further support for an argument, and definitely add to the rhetorical persuasiveness of a paper.

This thesis is getting pretty good; by mentioning specific ways in which personal experience can be useful, it's guiding my expectations about what exactly the rest of the paper is going to cover. I do see some possibilities for improvement, though. First: I'm not exactly sure what "simple rhetoric" means, although I do like the attention to audience ("making the reader more skeptical"). And I'm not sure what "introduce and justify perspectives" means, either, though it sounds interesting. Second: the sentence could still be even more specific. Exactly what kind of "further support" can personal experience provide? Third: "add to the rhetorical persuasiveness of the paper" is no longer necessary, because the previous parts of the sentence are more specific versions of the same idea. Fourth: although the sentence is grammatically correct, it's getting long and unwieldy. If more information is to be added, the sentence should probably be split apart into several sentences.

Although using personal experience can undermine an argument by making a reader suspect that the claims are based on biased opinions rather than objective reasoning, personal experience can also introduce and justify perspectives that traditional academic writing fails to consider. In particular, personal experience can provide an accessible introduction to a complex issue, and, by allowing the reader to connect with the writer personally as well as intellectually, can support a traditional *logos*-based argument with elements of *ethos*. When implemented effectively, such strategies may add to, rather than detract from, a paper's authenticity or credibility.

This version of the thesis is considerably more precise than the preceding versions. It uses some terms from class (*logos*, *ethos*) in a way that makes sense within the paper's argument. And it makes some clear promises about what the rest of the paper is going to do; having read this thesis, I expect the body of the paper to include and explain at least one example in which a writer's use of personal experience "provides an introduction to a complex issue" and at least one example of a case in which an argument based on facts and reason (*logos*) is supplemented (not necessarily replaced) by an argument based on character (*ethos*). Those paragraphs would need to include some explanation of *how* personal experience makes the writer more credible in that rhetorical situation, but I'm content to wait for that information to emerge in the body of the paper; it's enough, for now, to know that it's on the way.

Assignment: Analyze the work of three writers we've read in terms of their use of the concept of denaturalization. What behaviors or beliefs do they denaturalize, and what specifically do they hope to accomplish by doing so? You may also consider negative examples, in which an author fails to denaturalize a behavior or belief that is historically or culturally situated.

hooks, Mackler, and Sepanski all address the issue of denaturalization.

Well, sure. This idea is built into the question; it's obvious. As in the previous example, the thesis needs to make a *specific claim* about the essays in relation to the concept.

hooks is successful at denaturalizing certain behaviors; Mackler and Sepanski are not.

Okay, this sentence is starting to look more like a thesis; there's a claim being made about the authors' relative degrees of success at denaturalizing. But I want more specificity: what are the "certain behaviors" being denaturalized? And also: which essays are being discussed here?

While hooks successfully denaturalizes the idea of women as inherently non-violent in her essay “feminism and militarism: a comment,” Carolyn Mackler’s essay “Memoirs of a (Sorta) Ex-Shaver” fails to denaturalize the idea that women are hairless, just as Diane Sepanski’s essay “The Skinny on Small” fails to denaturalize the idea that women are quiet.

Much better, because now I know which essays the paper is covering and what issues will be discussed. But: what are the criteria for “successful denaturalization”?

Using hooks’ argument that “the personal is political,” denaturalization should be seen as a complex process that involves acknowledging the stereotyped behavior, personally overcoming it, and, ultimately, collectively resisting the stereotyped behavior in the political arena. While hooks successfully denaturalizes the idea of women as inherently non-violent in her essay “feminism and militarism: a comment,” Carolyn Mackler’s essay “Memoirs of a (Sorta) Ex-Shaver” fails to denaturalize the idea that women are hairless, just as Diane Sepanski’s essay “The Skinny on Small” fails to denaturalize the idea that women are quiet.

Aha! This explanation of denaturalization is especially sharp because, while totally in line with the concept as discussed in class, there’s actually an extra claim embedded in it: denaturalization can be usefully connected with the idea that “the personal is political.” (Incidentally, the author was able to come back to this connection in the essay’s conclusion and offer further commentary on its importance—a strategy that made for an interesting and effective final paragraph that didn’t just restate the intro.) I think the thesis could still be pushed further, though; I want to know how Mackler’s and Sepanski’s projects fail to meet the criteria that have been established, and whether they fail for similar reasons.

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I’ll take that. I’m not entirely sure that I actually *agree* with this argument, but the logic behind it is clear and sound and has been effectively presented. Now, of course, the rest of the essay has to follow through on this argument and do the actual work of proving the claims; but because the thesis cluster sets up such a specific set of criteria for analyzing and evaluating the essays, it should be fairly easy for the writer to check back and answer the question “is the essay really doing what I said it was going to do?”