

Scholarly writing style (theology papers)

Bridwell Library workshop February 2012

Thesis

(Adapted from http://www.dartmouth.edu/~writing/materials/student/ac_paper/develop.shtml and The Writing Center, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, <http://writingcenter.unc.edu/resources/handouts-demos/writing-the-paper/thesis-statements>)

What is a thesis statement?

A thesis statement:

- tells the reader how you will interpret the significance of the subject matter under discussion.
- is a road map for the paper; in other words, it tells the reader what to expect from the rest of the paper.
- directly answers a question. A thesis is an interpretation of a question or subject, not the subject itself. The subject, or topic, of an essay might be Anselm's doctrine of salvation or John Wesley; a thesis must then offer a way to understand Anselm's doctrine or something about John Wesley.
- makes a claim that others might dispute.
- is usually (but not always) a single sentence somewhere in your first paragraph that presents your argument to the reader. The rest of the paper, the body of the essay, gathers and organizes evidence that will persuade the reader of the logic of your interpretation.

If your assignment asks you to take a position or develop a claim about a subject, you may need to convey that position or claim in a thesis statement near the beginning of your draft. The assignment may not explicitly state that you need a thesis statement because your instructor may assume you will include one. When in doubt, ask your instructor if the assignment requires a thesis statement. When an assignment asks you to analyze, to interpret, to compare and contrast, to demonstrate cause and effect, to make an argument, or to take a stand on an issue, it is likely that you are being asked to develop a thesis and to support it persuasively.

Writing a thesis statement:

No sentence in your paper will vex you as much as the thesis statement. And with good reason: the thesis sentence is typically that ONE sentence in the paper that asserts, controls, and structures the entire argument. Without a strong persuasive, thoughtful thesis, a paper might seem unfocused, weak, and not worth the reader's time.

A thesis is the result of a lengthy thinking process. Formulating a thesis is not the first thing you do after reading an essay assignment. Before you develop an argument on any topic, you have to collect and organize evidence, look for possible relationships between known facts (such as surprising contrasts or similarities), and think about the significance of these relationships. Once you do this thinking, you will probably have a "working thesis," a basic or main idea, an argument that you think you can support with evidence but that may need adjustment along the way.

So what makes a good thesis sentence?

A good thesis will generally have the following characteristics:

- *A good thesis sentence will make a claim.*

This doesn't mean that you have to reduce an idea to an "either/or" proposition and then take a stand. Rather, you need to develop an interesting perspective that you can support and defend. This perspective must be more than an observation. Put another way, a good thesis sentence will inspire (rather than quiet) other points of view. If your thesis is positing something that no one can (or would wish to) argue with, then it's not a very good thesis. If no one would, or even could, disagree with your thesis, it's possible that you are simply providing a summary, rather than making an argument.

- *A good thesis sentences will control the entire argument.*

Your thesis sentence determines what you are required to say in a paper. It also determines what you cannot say. Every paragraph in your paper exists in order to support your thesis. Accordingly, if one of your paragraphs seems irrelevant to your thesis you have two choices: get rid of the paragraph, or rewrite your thesis.

- *A good thesis will provide a structure for your argument.*

A good thesis not only signals to the reader *what* your argument is, but *how* your argument will be presented. In other words, your thesis sentence should either directly or indirectly suggest the structure of your argument to your reader.

Say, for example, that you are going to argue that "Anselm's argument for the appropriateness of incarnation is based on three primary considerations: A, B, and C." In this case, the reader understands that you are going to have three important points to cover, and that these points will appear in a certain order. If you suggest a particular ordering principle and then abandon it, the reader will feel betrayed, irritated, and confused.

- *A good thesis will be specific.*

Thesis sentences that are too vague often do not have a strong argument. If your thesis contains words like "good," "successful," or "important," see if you could be more specific: why is something good; what specifically makes something successful; why is it that these elements are so important? A thesis needs to pass the "so what?" test: if a reader's first response is, "So what?" then you need to clarify, to forge a relationship, or to connect to larger issue.

A thesis also needs to pass the "how and why?" test. If a reader's first response is "how?" or "why?" your thesis may be too open-ended and lack guidance for the reader.

Argument

(Adapted from http://twp.duke.edu/uploads/assets/handout_argument.pdf)

Making an Academic Argument

Effective argument will be well-grounded, persuasive, and significant. Effective argument requires us not just to participate in an academic conversation but also contribute something of value to the discussion.

Questions to Consider

1. What are you claiming?
2. What reasons do you have for believing that claim?
3. What evidence do you base these reasons on?
4. What would you say to someone who said, “But what about...?”

What qualities should a main claim have?

1. Contestable
2. Reasonable
3. Specific
4. Significant
5. Interpretive

To acknowledge and respond to questions and opposition to your argument, consider using phrases such as “to be sure,” “admittedly,” and “some have claimed,” etc., followed with “although,” “but,” “however,” “on the other hand,” etc.

Evidence

1. Texts
2. Arguments (in texts, or not)
3. Other – use with care in theological writing, and especially for argument papers. (Wesleyan quadrilateral: scripture, tradition, reason, experience)

Tips for writing effective theology papers (h/t Jessica Boon and David Kelsey)

- 1) Make a main claim (aka thesis or argument) about the text that you can prove within the *page limit*, don’t just summarize the entire thing.
 - 1a) A corollary: Main claims are proved in logical sequence with evidence taken from the primary and secondary source(s) you are using. Think geometry (if A, then B; if B, then C; if C, then D, which was my hypothesis; QED), rather than sermon (personal reflection here, tidbit of politics there, historical info over there, biblical passage here, all generally gesturing towards a theme, ending up leaving the audience with food for thought).
 - 1b) Make a main claim you can prove in the space allotted. If you include all the evidence for a 10-page paper for a 3-page assignment, you will be short on structure and analysis.
- 2) Organization is critical. Use *transition sentences* to signal what stage of your argument you are at with each new paragraph. This means you need to understand the logic of your argument, then you need to take your readers through a sequence that will make sense to *them*.
 - 2a) Do not use your intro or first page to explain the history of the world up until the time of your primary source, or the history of theological debates over the issue you are addressing, or its universal significance for all human beings everywhere and at all times.
 - 2b) Make sure your conclusion goes beyond, but not too far beyond, your paper. If you have made a successful argument, your reader will know what you’re arguing, so you may want

to draw out some implications of your argument. Those implications still need to be connected to your argument. (Don't move from theological argument to confessional language.)

- 3) Analyze your evidence.
 - 3a) Practice close reading.
 - 3b) Distinguish between your beliefs, arguments, and understandings, and those of your author(s).
- 4) Assertion is not the same as argument. You are expected to state not only what you think, but to explain why you have opted for one position over another. What reasons or concerns persuaded you? Consider this especially when you are setting out the necessary assumptions or definitions for your paper. You must consider major counterarguments to your proposal which entail a challenge not only to the answer you give, but to the way you have framed the question.
- 5) Be both bold and humble. Intelligent and faithful people have been arguing many of these issues for two thousand years and more. You should make an argument, but that argument is not and should not be the final word on the issue either for you or for the world.

From text to paper: paraphrasing

(From <http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/619/01/>)

Paraphrase: Write it in Your Own Words

Summary: This resources discusses how to paraphrase correctly and accurately.

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A paraphrase is...

- your own rendition of essential information and ideas expressed by someone else, presented in a new form.
- one legitimate way (when accompanied by accurate documentation) to borrow from a source.
- a more detailed restatement than a summary, which focuses concisely on a single main idea.

Paraphrasing is a valuable skill because...

- it is better than quoting information from an undistinguished passage.
- it helps you control the temptation to quote too much.
- the mental process required for successful paraphrasing helps you to grasp the full meaning of the original.

6 Steps to Effective Paraphrasing

1. Reread the original passage until you understand its full meaning.
2. Set the original aside, and write your paraphrase on a note card.
3. Jot down a few words below your paraphrase to remind you later how you envision using this material.
4. At the top of the note card, write a key word or phrase to indicate the subject of your paraphrase.
5. Check your rendition with the original to make sure that your version accurately expresses all the essential information in a new form.
6. Use quotation marks to identify any unique term or phraseology you have borrowed exactly from the source.

Record the source (including the page) on your note card so that you can credit it easily if you decide to incorporate the material into your paper.

Some examples to compare

The original passage:

Students frequently overuse direct quotation in taking notes, and as a result they overuse quotations in the final [research] paper. Probably only about 10% of your final manuscript should appear as directly quoted matter. Therefore, you should strive to limit the amount of exact transcribing of source materials while taking notes. Lester, James D. Writing Research Papers. 2nd ed. (1976): 46-47.

A legitimate paraphrase:

In research papers students often quote excessively, failing to keep quoted material down to a desirable level. Since the problem usually originates during note taking, it is essential to minimize the material recorded verbatim (Lester 46-47).

An acceptable summary:

Students should take just a few notes in direct quotation from sources to help minimize the amount of quoted material in a research paper (Lester 46-47).

A plagiarized version:

Students often use too many direct quotations when they take notes, resulting in too many of them in the final research paper. In fact, probably only about 10% of the final copy should consist of directly quoted material. So it is important to limit the amount of source material copied while taking notes

Sources

(from <http://twp.duke.edu/uploads/assets/quotations.pdf>)

Quoting vs. paraphrasing

When you quote, you replicate exactly the words of another text. You indicate this replication by placing the words between quotation marks or offsetting them as a block quotation. When you paraphrase, you restate ideas of the original text in your own words. In both cases, give credit where due by citing your source(s).

Reasons to quote

There are several reasons to quote material from other sources:

- To bolster your claims by citing an authority on the topic:

Academic writing is a dialog—a conversation with your professor, peers, readers, and other thinkers who preceded you and whose published and unpublished works you draw on as you develop your own ideas. Rhetorician and philosopher Kenneth Burke describes this process in terms of entering a parlor and listening in on a discussion that has been going on since long before you arrived: “You listen for a while, until you decide that you have caught the tenor of the argument; then you put in your oar” (Burke, *The Philosophy of Literary Form*, 110-11).

- To offer evidence in support of your claims:

Winsor's whimsy extends to the temporal as well. Thus we meet "Probable-Possible," a black hen incapable of comprehending "the Positive Now"; and Humpty Dumpty, who finds salvation through a well-timed royal intervention: "The King set the time machine back to two, / Now Humpty's unscrambled and good as new" (*The Space Child's Mother Goose*, n.p.).

- To share a particularly captivating wording, formulation, or idea with your readers:

Gulick's juxtaposition of glowing colors and inviting textures creates what Frances Croutade terms an "onomatopoetic aura" (13).

- To create variety within your text. Remember, though, that yours is usually the most important voice in your writing. Use quotations to enhance what you have to say, rather than letting them speak for you.

Introducing and interpreting quotations

- As odd as it may sound, quotations don't speak for themselves. They require context, introduction, and interpretation. Explain their significance.
- Avoid simply plunking quotations into the middle of a paragraph to take the place of your own sentences. Recall the idea of the Burkean parlor and consider that it is impolite not to introduce the other "conversationalists" to your readers.

POOR: Quoting effectively is not without challenges. "In fact, it is as difficult to appropriate the thoughts of others as it is to invent" (Emerson, *Quotation and Originality*, 42).

BETTER: Quoting effectively is not without challenges. As poet and transcendentalist Ralph Waldo Emerson observes, "In fact, it is as difficult to appropriate the thoughts of others as it is to invent" (*Quotation and Originality*, 42).

- Express yourself in your own words. Quotations can spice up your writing, but avoid overusing them or inelegantly stringing them together with patches of your own writing.

As the Kansas University Writing Center puts it, "Incorporate [quotations] into the writing instead of inserting writing into the quotations" ("*Incorporating References*," retrieved 21 October 2009 from <http://www.writing.ku.edu/~writing/guides/references.shtml>).

- Quote only as much text as you need to make your point. There's no reason to pad your paper with unnecessary text; moreover, some readers have a habit of skipping over long quotations. (Be honest now. Did you read all of the first example above?)

Citing sources

Among the most fundamental ethical principles of academic discourse are giving credit where credit is due and being open about resources consulted so that others may retrace our steps. To realize both principles, always cite direct quotations and paraphrases. When paraphrasing, be meticulous about putting ideas into your own words. Ideas obtained from other sources (published or unpublished, printed or online, oral or written) must be cited unless the material is common knowledge. Failure to credit sources constitutes plagiarism and goes beyond being bad form: it can be grounds for dismissal from the university or from a job.

Not sure what to cite? Consult the Writing Studio's workshop Working with Sources: Avoiding Plagiarism or Duke University Library's webpages on plagiarism, <http://www.lib.duke.edu/libguide/plagiarism.htm>.

Mechanics of quotations

Below are a few basics on the mechanics of quotation. For nittier grittier detail, consult a reliable style guide such as *The Chicago Manual of Style*.

- Quote accurately. Signal editorial changes to the original text with [square brackets], omission of words with...ellipses..., and emphasis with italics and a parenthetical note:

“He took his vorpal sword in hand: / Long time the manxome [Jabberwock] he sought” (Carroll, lines 9-10). “And, as in uffish thought he stood, / The Jabberwock... / Came whiffling through the tulgey wood...” (13-15).

“One, two! One, two! And through and through / The vorpal blade went snicker-snack” (17-18, emphasis added).

- When a quotation is logically followed by a period or comma, that punctuation goes before the closing quotation mark, even if the punctuation is not part of the original text; in contrast, semi-colons and colons go to the right of the closing quotation mark:

The narrator's warning, “Beware the Jabberwock, my son,” goes unheeded, for the lad immediately commences hunting the beast. Carroll indicates the hunter stands “in uffish thought”; yet as Birdwell notes, the boy has little reason at this point to be petulant (“huffish”).

- If quotations are followed immediately by parenthetical citations, shift commas and periods to the right of the citation, even if the punctuation was part of the original text:

Given Carroll's etymology of “mimsy” as deriving from “flimsy and miserable” (Through the Looking Glass, 127), Birdwell's contention that a borogove is a Boron-filled barn makes little sense.

- Put question marks within closing quotation marks if they are part of the original text; put them outside of the closing quotation marks if they are part of your text:

The adult rhetorically asks, “And hast thou slain the Jabberwock?”
Where else but England could toves so interminably “gyre and gimble in the wabe”?

- Use single quotation marks to indicate quotes within quotes:

In the penultimate stanza, the adult authority revels in the child's victory: “O frabjous day!
Callooh! Callay! / He chortled in his joy” (23-24).

- Quotations that require four or more lines of text should be set off as block quotations. The quoted text is not enclosed within quotation marks. Block quotations retain the exact

punctuation of the original text; parenthetical citations follow to the right of concluding punctuation.

Birdwell questions the accuracy of Pendleton's theory. As he explains,
There is no evidence, in fact, that the Jabberwock and the Snark ever met. Late-18th-century zoologist Alice Liddell was the first to observe the severe allergic reactions Whiffling Burlblers suffer when they encounter Booji; their fits include sneezing, uncontrolled hiccups of flaming breath, heavy perspiring, and in extreme cases, fainting. As there is no doubt the Snark was a Boojum, any meeting between the Jabberwock and the Snark would have permanently incapacitated the former. (Birdwell, 682)

Other resources

One of the best online resources for writing in higher education is the writing program at Duke's website, at <http://twp.duke.edu/writing-studio/resources>. Many of the resources identified below can be found there either as documents or links to other sites.

You will also find it helpful to consult <http://writingcenter.unc.edu/resources/handouts-demos>, UNC's site, which includes a similarly wide and helpful variety of resources.

Grammar problems and common errors

<http://bcs.bedfordstmartins.com/easywriter3e/20errors/> A list of the 20 most common errors, with examples and tips for how to avoid them. Common errors that Perkins students struggle with include #8, the comma splice; #10, unnecessary shift in tense; and #14, lack of subject-verb agreement.

<http://grammar.ccc.commnet.edu/grammar/index2.htm> A comprehensive, A-Z guide to grammar and writing, with links to quizzes, Q&As, and FAQs. Students writing argumentative essays in religion and theology might find the list of logical fallacies especially helpful:

http://grammar.ccc.commnet.edu/grammar/composition/argument_logic.htm

Language

<http://writingcenter.unc.edu/resources/handouts-demos/citation/gender-sensitive-language> Many Perkins students struggle with the adjustment to using gender-inclusive or gender-sensitive language in their writing. This page offers some tips on how to avoid clunky writing without using masculine language as a generic default.