

Thesis Exercise

From Rosenwasser, David and Jill Stephen, *Writing Analytically*, 2nd Ed., Harcourt College Publishers, 2000.

The five kinds of weak thesis statements are ones that:

1. Make no claim
2. Are obviously true or a statement of fact
3. Restate conventional wisdom
4. Offer personal conviction as the basis for the claim
5. Make an overly broad claim.

A thesis is an idea:

- An idea answers a question; it explains something that needs to be explained.
- An idea usually starts with an observation that is puzzling, with something that you want to figure out rather than something that you think you already understand.
- An idea may be the discovery of a question where there seemed not to be one.
- An idea may make explicit and explore the meaning of something implicit—an unstated assumption upon which an argument rests, or a logical consequence of a given position.
- An idea may connect elements of a subject and explain the significance of that connection.
- An idea often accounts for some dissonance—that is, something that seems not to fit together.

WEAK THESIS #1 – The thesis that makes no claim

Examples:

- a) I'm going to write about Darwin's concerns with evolution in *The Origin of Species*.
- b) This paper will address the characteristics of a good corporate manager.

Solution: raise specific issues for the essay to explore.

Solution Examples

- a) Darwin's concern with survival of the fittest in *The Origin of Species* leads him to neglect a potentially conflicting aspect of his theory of evolution—survival as a matter of interdependence.
- b) The very trait that makes for an effective corporate manager—the drive to succeed—can also make the leader domineering and therefore ineffective.

WEAK THESIS #2 – Obviously true or statement of fact

Examples

- a) The jean industry targets its advertisements to appeal to young adults.

- b) The flight from teaching to research and publishing in higher education is a controversial issue in the academic world. I will show different views and aspects concerning this problem.

Solution: Find some avenue of inquiry—a question about the facts or an issue raised by them. Make an assertion with which it would be possible for readers to disagree.

Solution examples:

- a) By inventing new terms, such as “loose fit” and “relaxed fit,” the jean industry has attempted to normalize, even glorify, its product for an older and fatter generation.
- b) The “flight to teaching” to research and publishing in higher education is a controversial issue in the academic world. As I will attempt to show, the controversy is based to a significant degree on a false assumption: that doing research necessarily leads teachers away from the classroom.

WEAK THESIS #3 – Restates conventional wisdom

Examples

- a) An important part of one’s college education is learning to better understand others’ points of view.
- b) From cartoons in the morning to adventure shows at night, there is too much violence on television.
- c) “I was supposed to bring the coolers; you were supposed to bring the chips!” exclaimed ex-Beatle Ringo Starr, who appeared on TV commercials for wine coolers a few years ago. By using rock music to sell a wide range of products, the advertising agencies, in league with corporate giants such as Pepsi, Michelop, and Ford, have corrupted the spirit of rock and roll.

Solution: seek to complicate—see more than one point of view on—your subject. Avoid conventional wisdom unless you can qualify it or introduce a few perspective on it.

Solution Samples:

- a) Although an important part of one’s college education is learning to better understand others’ points of view, a persistent danger is that students will be required simply to substitute the teacher’s answers for the ones they grew up uncritically believing.
- b) Although some might argue that the presence of rock-and-roll soundtracks in TV commercials has corrupted rock’s spirit, this point of view not only falsifies the history of rock but also blinds us to the ways that the music has improved the quality of television.

WEAK THESIS #4 – Offers personal conviction as the basis for the claim.

Examples:

- a) The songs of the punk rock group Minor Threat relate to the feelings of individuals who dare to be different. The group’s songs are composed of pure emotion. Pure emotion is very important in music, because it serves as a vehicle to convey the

important message of individuality. Minor Threat's songs are meaningful to me because I can identify with them.

- b) Sir Thomas More's *Utopia* proposes an unworkable set of solutions to society's problems because, like communist Russia, it suppresses individualism.
- c) Any individual, if he looks deeply enough into his soul, knows what is right and what is wrong. The environment should be protected because it is the right thing to do, not because someone is forcing you to do it.

Solution: Try on other points of view honestly and dispassionately; treat your ideas as hypotheses to be tested rather than as obvious truths. In the following examples, the opinions have been replaced with ideas—theories about the meaning and significance of their subjects that could be supported with evidence.

Solution examples:

- a) Sir Thomas More's *Utopia* treats individualism as a serious but remediable problem. His radical treatment of what we might now call "socialization" attempts to redefine the meaning and origin of individual identity.
- b) Although I agree with the argument that the environmentalists and business should work together to ensure the ecological future of the world, Kirkpatrick's argument undervalues the necessity of pressuring businesses to attend to the environmental concerns that may not benefit them in the short run.

WEAK THESIS #5 – makes overly broad claim

Examples:

- a) Violent revolutions have had both positive and negative results.
- b) There are many similarities and differences between the Carolingian and the Burgundian Renaissances.
- c) It is important to understand why leaders act in a leadership role. What is the driving force? Is it an internal drive for the business or group to succeed, or is it an internal drive for the leader to dominate others?

Solution: Convert broad categories and generic (fits anything) claims to more specific assertions; find ways to bring out the complexity of your subject.

Solution Examples

- a) The differences between the Carolingian and Burgundian Renaissances outweigh their similarities.
- b) Although violent revolutions begin to redress long-standing social inequities, they often do so at the cost of long-term economic dysfunction and the suffering that attends it.