

HOW TO DEVELOP A THESIS STATEMENT (Literary Criticism)

Topic

A topic is the general question you will explore in your essay. It may be a question about: *character, relationships among characters, themes, styles (imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism, point of view, narration, setting), structure, historical context, critical overview or media adaptations*. If you have difficulty choosing a topic, here are some suggestions about where to start:

1. Keep a list of questions or interesting observations while reading a text. A close reading of your primary source will help sharpen your ideas. Look for an idea that appeals to you—something that you would like to discover more about.
2. During class discussion, make note of unique questions and debates that arise.
3. Meet with your teacher to brainstorm ideas for a topic.
4. Read secondary sources to find out what questions the critics are asking about a text. As you peruse material provided by your teacher or located through library research, look for ideas that appeal to you. Read a critical essay in *Gale's Literary Criticism* series. Read a chapter in a casebook.
5. Choose a topic that can be adequately developed given the guidelines of the assignment.
6. Keep your topic clear, concise, and restricted. Avoid over-generalizing.
7. Take a stand and be forceful. Assert your conclusions about a subject.
8. Express a unique and insightful argument that can be supported with evidence, not a statement of absolute fact. Make a statement with which reasonable people could disagree.

Write down the title of the literary work you are analyzing and your topic: *character, relationships among characters, themes, styles (imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism, point of view, narration, setting), structure, historical context, critical overview or media adaptations*.

Thesis statements

A thesis is the central argument that you will make about that topic. The thesis is the controlling idea of the essay; every sentence and paragraph in the essay must provide supporting statements and specific information to prove the thesis. The sooner you can state the thesis clearly and concisely, the more efficient and productive your thinking and note taking will be. Note how each thesis statement below contains a clearly focused argument. A thesis may be proved affirmatively or negatively. A thesis may be interpretive.

Supporting statements

Supporting statements are the main points in your argument to prove your thesis. Supporting statements contain the evidence to support your thesis. Supporting statements are your conclusions about a subject.

Sample literary thesis statements

| TOPIC | QUESTION AND THESIS STATEMENT |
|-----------|---|
| Character | In <i>The Scarlet Letter</i> , Nathaniel Hawthorne depicts Pearl as alien to her society until her father acknowledges her. |

| TOPIC | QUESTION AND THESIS STATEMENT |
|---|---|
| Relationships among Characters | In <i>The Catcher in the Rye</i> , Salinger shows that the relationship between Holden and Phoebe acts as a positive force on Holden. |
| Themes | <i>The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn</i> is a satire on racism. |
| Style: Effective use of imagery, foreshadowing, or symbolism to advance character development, theme or artistic purpose | Through the use of images and symbols in <i>The Catcher in the Rye</i> , Salinger reveals many subtleties about Holden's sensitive personality |
| Style: The point of view, or narration advance character development, theme or artistic purpose | The final fifth of <i>The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn</i> does not help fulfill Mark Twain's artistic purpose in the novel. |
| Setting | The raft on the Mississippi River in <i>The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn</i> is a place with different rules than the towns along the river. |
| Structure | In <i>The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn</i> , Mark Twain uses the river journey to illustrate Huck's increasing awareness of the moral hypocrisy in the "civilized" South. |
| Historical Context: The social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created | Arthur Miller changed some of the facts about the Salem Witch Trials in his play, <i>The Crucible</i> , to advance his artistic purpose. |
| Critical Overview: Background on critical reputation of the novel including controversies | What reasons do critics have for censoring <i>The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn</i> ? Subordinate questions: Is the novel obscene? Is the novel racist? Is the language too coarse? Is it immoral? |
| Media Adaptations | The 1992 movie <i>Of Mice and Men</i> more poignantly expresses the alienation and loneliness of migrant farm workers than the novel. |

State your thesis. Be sure to include the title of the literary work in your thesis.

List supporting statements: