
A POCKET GUIDE TO

Writing in History

EIGHTH EDITION

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4c Developing a thesis

Your *topic* is the subject you have been assigned to write about (for example, the Salem witchcraft trials, the Lewis and Clark expedition, the rise of the Nazi Party). If you merely collect bits of information about your topic, however, you will not have written an effective history paper. A history paper, like many other kinds of academic writing, usually takes the form of an argument in support of a *thesis*—a statement that reflects the *conclusion* you have reached about your topic after a careful analysis of the sources.

Since the thesis is the central idea that drives a history essay, it is important that you understand exactly what a thesis is. Imagine that you have been given the following essay assignment.

Discuss the role of nonviolent resistance in the Indian independence movement.

As you develop your thesis statement, keep the following in mind.

- **A thesis is *not* a description of your paper topic.** Although your reader should not have to guess what your paper is about, the thesis must do

more than announce your subject or the purpose for which you are writing. "This paper is about the role of nonviolent resistance in the Indian independence movement" is *not* a thesis statement; nor is "The purpose of this paper is to describe the methods Mohandas Gandhi used to gain India's independence from Great Britain." These sentences merely restate the assigned topic.

- **A thesis is *not* a question.** Although historians always ask questions as they read (see 3a for advice on active reading) and a thesis statement arises from the historian's attempt to answer a question, a question is not, in itself, a thesis. "Why were Mohandas Gandhi's methods successful in the movement to achieve India's independence from Great Britain?" is a valid historical question, but it is *not* a thesis statement.
- **A thesis is *not* a statement of fact.** While historians deal in factual information about the past, a fact, however interesting, is simply a piece of data. The statement "Mohandas Gandhi led the movement for India's independence from Britain" is *not* a thesis.
- **A thesis is *not* a statement of opinion.** Although a thesis statement must reflect what you have concluded, it cannot be a simple statement of belief or preference. The assertion "Mohandas Gandhi is my favorite political leader of the twentieth century" does *not* constitute a thesis.

In short, a thesis is *not* a description of your paper topic, a question, a statement of fact, or a statement of opinion, although it is sometimes confused with all of the above. Rather, *a thesis is a statement that reflects what you have concluded about the topic of your paper, based on a critical analysis and interpretation of the source materials you have examined.*

For the assignment given above, the following sentence is an acceptable thesis.

Mohandas Gandhi's decision to respond to force with acts of civil disobedience focused the world's attention on the legitimacy of British rule of India; his indictment of British colonial policy in the court of public opinion did far more damage to the British military than any weapon could.

You should note three things about this statement.

- First, while the thesis is not itself a question, it is an **answer to a question**—in this case, the question posed above: “Why were Mohandas Gandhi’s methods successful in the movement to achieve India’s independence from Great Britain?” A thesis usually arises from the questions you pose of the text or texts as you engage in active reading.
- Second, the thesis is **specific**. In attempting to answer the historical question raised above, the writer did not make a broad generalization like “Gandhi was successful because people thought he was a good person” or “Gandhi succeeded because the British were treating the Indians badly.” Rather, the thesis makes a specific claim: that the contrast between Gandhi’s use of civil disobedience and the use of force by the British had a significant impact on public opinion.
- Third, a thesis is always a **debatable** point, a *conclusion* with which a thoughtful reader might disagree. In other words, **the thesis makes an assertion or a claim that sets up an argument**. It is the writer’s job, in the body of a paper, to provide an argument based on evidence that shows his or her reasons for reaching a particular conclusion and that will convince the reader that his or her thesis is a valid one.

The thesis, then, is the heart of your paper. It presents what you have concluded about the topic under discussion and provides the focal point for the rest of the essay.

To ensure that your thesis really is a thesis, review the Tips for Writers box on page 58.

Tips for Writers

Testing Your Thesis

| If . . . | Then . . . |
|---|------------------------------|
| Your proposed thesis does no more than repeat the topic you are writing about | → It is <i>not</i> a thesis. |
| Your proposed thesis poses a question without suggesting an answer | → It is <i>not</i> a thesis. |
| Your proposed thesis merely articulates a fact or series of facts | → It is <i>not</i> a thesis. |
| Your proposed thesis simply reflects a personal belief or preference | → It is <i>not</i> a thesis. |

BUT

| If . . . | Then . . . |
|--|-------------------|
| <p>Your proposed thesis</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • suggests an answer to a question you have posed as a result of your reading, <i>and</i> • is specific, rather than general, <i>and</i> • is debatable (that is, it asserts a conclusion with which a reader might disagree), <i>and</i> • can be supported by evidence from the sources | → It is a thesis. |