

College Writing: Formulating an Arguable Thesis

When college professors assign papers, they want to see how well you can demonstrate your critical and analytical skills. Usually, professors ask students to write persuasive essays. To persuade your reader, you must form an arguable thesis that you then prove by supplying evidence that supports your argument.

Argumentative writing prepares you for the working world. No matter what field you choose, you'll need to know how to discuss, examine, and persuade.

What Is a Thesis Anyway?

Essentially, you're taking a stand on an issue and defending it. Simply put, a thesis is an idea that you state for discussion or consideration, especially when you plan to prove your thesis is true, even in light of objections to it. Often, we refer to a thesis as an "argument," although we aren't really arguing in the true sense of the word. Instead, we're trying to prove that the thesis is valid. We do this by discussing facts that support our thesis. We can also support our thesis by examining ideas that contradict it. Ultimately, we're trying to persuade our reader that the thesis is either correct, or that the thesis is a viable option.

Check on These Elements before You Begin Writing

You'll need to check on a couple of elements before you begin:

- **Find out how long your professor wants the paper to be.**
Length requirements have more to do with the development of your idea than they do with the number of pages you need to write. If your professor asks you to write a five page paper, he or she means that it will take you about five pages worth of writing to sufficiently develop your idea and to support your thesis to meet the requirements of the assignment.
- **Ask if your professor wants you to follow a particular format.**
Most academic disciplines (what you'd refer to as your "major") have some type of style guide that scholars of that discipline follow. These style guides help you to format your paper and to cite your sources properly. University and college libraries usually have digital copies of style guides, so you can access them online rather than purchasing a copy of your own. However, if you're writing a paper for a class in your major, you should consider getting a copy of the style guide for your own reference.

Some professors deduct points if you don't follow the appropriate format.

- **Ask if your professor will read your drafts of your paper before it's due.**
Some professors do this, others don't. You'll lose nothing by asking.

Choose an Argument You Can Support with Facts, not Beliefs

As you work toward choosing your topic, make certain that you choose something you can support with facts, not with beliefs. *No matter how strongly you believe something, you will rarely succeed in persuading your reader to accept your beliefs as facts.*

Each of us has beliefs that we hold dear. Beliefs are important. They are sacred. But they are *not* necessarily facts.

We can strongly believe that something is true, but we cannot necessarily prove it with facts. We can prove something is a fact with scientific evidence. For instance, you could believe with all of your heart that the earth is flat, but scientific proof would not support your belief. Therefore, you should avoid choosing topics that are based on your beliefs, particularly if they are your religious, political, or emotional beliefs. These topics are virtually impossible to prove in a persuasive essay, and they are, in most cases, inappropriate for college-level writing.

Think of your paper as a court case—your job is to support your thesis with solid facts so that the reader has no choice but to accept your argument as a possible option, even if the reader doesn't necessarily agree with what you've said. Remember that juries usually base their rulings on facts, not on beliefs, even in highly controversial and emotionally-charged cases. Your professor will view your thesis the same way.

How Do I Formulate an Arguable Thesis?

First, you must pick a topic that you and your reader could examine and come to separate, possibly different conclusions. You want to make sure that your topic offers some element on which you and your reader could disagree, and that it's relevant to your audience.

Mere statements of fact make poor thesis topics. For instance, we could state:

College students spend a great deal of time texting their friends and family.

This isn't an argument. It's just true—college students *do* spend a great deal of time texting their friends and family. Not much arguing there, friends. Perhaps we change our statement to include a different aspect of the same topic:

Texting while driving is dangerous.

This is still a statement of fact, but it seems like we're moving in the right direction. Let's flesh this idea out a little more:

We need to support laws that make texting while driving illegal.

Now we're getting somewhere. Of course, some people will object to this idea, but that's really what you want. Now you have a topic that some people will agree with, and that will cause some people to disagree actively.

Now let's work on combining these three statements into our opening paragraph:

College students spend a great deal of time texting their friends and family. This offers them an easy way to stay in touch, and it can also provide a fun way to fill the time between classes. However, students pose a possible threat to themselves and to other people when they text while driving. Texting while driving is dangerous. Even if you think you can text while you drive, you cannot possibly pay enough attention to driving when you have your face pointed down to your mobile device. We need to support laws that make texting while driving illegal.

Understanding Your Audience

Know your target audience. Your argument must be logical, sincere, and informed. Treat your readers like intelligent, reasonable adults, and explain to them precisely why they should see things your way. Try to think about the opposing arguments you might encounter. You'll need to address those arguments in the body of your paper.

Use This Arguable Thesis Checklist

It looks like we've written a good first paragraph. Let's use this checklist to see if our thesis statement really is arguable, as well as if it meets some other items we need to have:

- ✓ Is the thesis stated clearly?
- ✓ Is the thesis specific?
- ✓ Is the thesis based on facts, not on beliefs?
- ✓ Is the thesis something that readers are aware of and interested in?
- ✓ Is the thesis something readers might agree or disagree with?
- ✓ Have I treated the readers like intelligent, reasonable adults?
- ✓ Have I included opposing arguments?
- ✓ Does the thesis include the words "should," "must," or "need"?
- ✓ Is the thesis the last statement of the first paragraph?