Developing a Thesis Statement

**Consider what your assignment asks you to do**
Your assignment may suggest several ways of looking at a topic, or it may name a fairly general concept that you will explore or analyze in your paper. You'll want to read your assignment carefully, looking for key terms that you can use to focus your topic.

**Inform yourself about your topic**
After you've identified the key words in your topic, the next step is to read about them in several sources, or generate as much information as possible through an analysis of your topic. Obviously, the more material or knowledge you have, the more possibilities will be available for a strong argument.

**Focus on one aspect of your topic**
As you consider your options, you must decide to focus on one aspect of your topic. This means that you cannot include everything you've learned about your topic, nor should you go off in several directions. If you end up covering too many different aspects of a topic, your paper will sprawl and be unconvincing in its argument, and it most likely will **not fulfill the assignment requirements**.

**Ask yourself whether your topic is worthy of your efforts**
Before you go too far, however, ask yourself whether your topic is worthy of your efforts. Try to avoid topics that already have too much written about them (i.e., "eating disorders and body image among adolescent women") or that simply are not important (i.e. "why I like ice cream"). **These topics may lead to a thesis that is either dry fact or a weird claim that cannot be supported. A good thesis falls somewhere between the two extremes. To arrive at this point, ask yourself what is new, interesting, contestable, or controversial about your topic.**

As you work on your thesis, remember to **keep the rest of your paper in mind at all times**. Sometimes your thesis needs to evolve as you develop new insights, find new evidence, or take a different approach to your topic.

**Compose a draft thesis statement**
If you are writing a paper that will have an argumentative thesis and are having trouble getting started, the techniques below may help you develop a temporary or "working" thesis statement.
Purpose statement

Begin with a purpose statement that you will later turn into a thesis statement.

**Assignment:** Discuss the history of the Reform Party and explain its influence on the 1990 presidential and Congressional election.

**Purpose Statement:** This paper briefly sketches the history of the grassroots, conservative, Perot-led Reform Party and analyzes how it influenced the economic and social ideologies of the two mainstream parties.

Question-to-Assertion

If your assignment asks a specific question(s), turn the question(s) into an assertion and give reasons why it is true or reasons for your opinion.

Main idea

Write a sentence that summarizes the main idea of the essay you plan to write.

Compose a draft thesis statement

**What to keep in mind as you draft an initial thesis statement**

Beginning statements obtained through the methods illustrated above can serve as a framework for planning or drafting your paper, but remember they're not yet the specific, argumentative thesis you want for the final version of your paper. In fact, in its first stages, a thesis statement usually is ill-formed or rough and serves only as a planning tool.

As you write, you may discover evidence that does not fit your temporary or "working" thesis. Or you may reach deeper insights about your topic as you do more research, and you will find that your thesis statement has to be more complicated to match the evidence that you want to use.

You must be willing to reject or omit some evidence in order to keep your paper cohesive and your reader focused. Or you may have to revise your thesis to match the evidence and insights that you want to discuss. **Read your draft carefully, noting the conclusions you have drawn and the major ideas which support or prove those conclusions. These will be the elements of your final thesis statement.**

Sometimes you will not be able to identify these elements in your early drafts, but as you consider how your argument is developing and how your evidence supports your main idea, ask yourself, **"What is the main point that I want to prove/discuss?"** and **"How will I convince the reader that this is true?"** When you can answer these questions, then you can begin to refine the thesis statement.
Refine and polish the thesis statement

To get to your final thesis, you'll need to refine your draft thesis so that it's specific and arguable.

• Ask if your draft thesis addresses the assignment
• Question each part of your draft thesis
• Clarify vague phrases and assertions
• Investigate alternatives to your draft thesis

Consult the example below for suggestions on how to refine your draft thesis statement.

Sample Assignment

Choose an activity and define it as a symbol of American culture. Your essay should cause the reader to think critically about the society which produces and enjoys that activity.

1. **Ask**

   The phenomenon of drive-in facilities is an interesting symbol of American culture, and these facilities demonstrate significant characteristics of our society.

   This statement does not fulfill the assignment because it does not require the reader to think critically about society.

2. **Question**

   Drive-ins are an interesting symbol of American culture because they represent Americans' significant creativity and business ingenuity.

   This statement is more precise in that it identifies two American characteristics that drive-ins appear to symbolize: creativity and ingenuity. But this assertion also seems to be one that few would argue with.

3. **Clarify**

   Among the types of drive-in facilities familiar during the twentieth century, drive-in movie theaters best represent American creativity, not merely because they were the forerunner of later drive-ins and drive-throughs, but because of their impact on our culture: they changed our relationship to the automobile, changed the way people experienced movies, and changed movie-going into a family activity.

   This statement introduces a new idea, and it is the first statement that is arguable to some extent. The new information is that drive-in movies were forerunners of later developments and that they had an impact on our culture.
4. **Investigate**

While drive-in facilities such as those at fast-food establishments, banks, pharmacies, and dry cleaners symbolize America's economic ingenuity, they also have affected our personal standards.

Notice that this sentence is different in structure from the one you started with ("Drive-ins represent Americans' creativity and business ingenuity"). The "factual" information in the earlier statement has been incorporated into a dependent clause ("While drive-ins . . . ingenuity"). The contestable part of your idea then appears in the independent clause ("they also have affected our personal standards"). In other words, you are no longer focusing on a claim that most people would agree with; instead you are using the obvious as a point of departure for an idea you will need to "prove."

5. **Refine**

While drive-in facilities such as those at fast-food restaurants, banks, pharmacies, and dry cleaners symbolize (1) Americans' business ingenuity, they also have contributed (2) to an increasing homogenization of our culture, (3) a willingness to depersonalize relationships with others, and (4) a tendency to sacrifice quality for convenience.

This statement is now specific and fulfills all parts of the assignment. This version, like any good thesis, is not self-evident; its points, 1-4, will have to be proven with evidence in the body of the paper. The numbers in this statement indicate the order in which the points will be presented. Depending on the length of the paper, there could be one paragraph for each numbered item or there could be blocks of paragraph for even pages for each one.

*As you work on your thesis, remember to keep the rest of your paper in mind at all times. Sometimes your thesis needs to evolve as you develop new insights, find new evidence, or take a different approach to your topic.*
Complete the final thesis statement

The Bottom Line

As you move through the process of crafting a thesis, you'll need to remember four things:

1. **Context matters**! Think about your course materials and lectures. Try to relate your thesis to the ideas your instructor is discussing.

2. As you go through the process described in this section, **always keep your assignment in mind**. You will be more successful when your thesis (and paper) responds to the assignment than if it argues a semi-related idea.

3. Your thesis statement should be **precise, focused, and contestable**; it should predict the sub-theses or blocks of information that you will use to prove your argument.

4. Make **sure** that you keep the rest of your paper in mind at all times. Change your thesis as your paper evolves, because you do **not** want your thesis to promise more than your paper actually delivers.

   In the beginning, the thesis statement was a tool to help you sharpen your focus, limit material and establish the paper's purpose. When your paper is finished, however, the thesis statement becomes a tool for your reader. It tells the reader what you have learned about your topic and what evidence led you to your conclusion. It keeps the reader on track--well able to understand and appreciate your argument.