

Five Ways of Looking At a Thesis

by Erik Simpson

1. A thesis says something a little strange.

A: By telling the story of Westley and Buttercup's triumph over evil, *The Princess Bride* affirms the power of true love.

B: Although the main plot of *The Princess Bride* rests on the natural power of true love, an examination of the way that fighting sticks (baseball bats, tree branches, and swords) link the frame story to the romance plot suggests that the grandson is being trained in true love, which is not “natural” but socialized.

Both of these statements, I would contend, are perfectly correct. Only the second one says something, well, weird. Weird is good. Sentence A encourages the paper to produce precisely the evidence that everybody always talks about in *The Princess Bride*; sentence B ensures that the paper will talk about something new.

Women are oppressed in *Maria. Frankenstein* warns society against taking science too far. The creature starts out good and becomes bad because of society. Yup. How can you make those things unusual or interesting?

Many good papers start by pointing out something that seems not to make sense and then making sense of it.

2. A thesis creates an argument that builds from one point to the next.

A: *The Rules* and Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey* both tell women how to act.

B: By looking at *The Rules*, a modern conduct book for women, we can see how Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey* is itself like a conduct book, questioning the rules for social success in her society and offering a new model.

This applies mostly to comparison/contrast papers. If the components of your argument can be rearranged without changing the thesis, your thesis has a problem.

3. A thesis fits comfortably into the Magic Thesis Sentence (MTS).

The MTS:

By looking at _____, we can see _____, which most readers don't see; this is important because _____.

Try it out with the above examples. I think it will please you.

4. A thesis says something about the text(s) you discuss *exclusively*.

Back to the first example:

A: By telling the story of Westley and Buttercup's triumph over evil, *The Princess Bride* affirms the power of true love.

B: Although the main plot of *The Princess Bride* rests on the natural power of true love, an examination of the way that fighting sticks (baseball bats, tree branches, and swords) link the frame story to the romance plot suggests that the grandson is being trained in true love, which is not “natural” but socialized.

Try substituting other works:

A: By telling the story of Darcy and Elizabeth's triumph over evil, *Pride and Prejudice* affirms the power of true love.

Sure. Bad sign.

B: Although the main plot of *Pride and Prejudice* rests on the natural power of true love, an examination of the way that fighting sticks (baseball bats, tree branches, and swords) link the frame story to the romance plot suggests that the grandson is being trained in true love, which is not “natural” but socialized.

Um, nope. Good sign.

5. A thesis makes a lot of information irrelevant.

One more time (so sue me, I like this example):

A: By telling the story of Westley and Buttercup's triumph over evil, *The Princess Bride* affirms the power of true love.

A plot summary of *The Princess Bride* would support this thesis. Bad sign. A strong thesis excludes most of the text in order to make a specific claim.

B: Although the main plot of *The Princess Bride* rests on the natural power of true love, an examination of the way that fighting sticks (baseball bats, tree branches, and swords) link the frame story to the romance plot suggests that the grandson is being trained in true love, which is not “natural” but socialized.

This excludes most of the text. Good sign. Your reader knows precisely which parts of it you'll be talking about and why.

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