

History Research Paper Thesis

IB 20TH CENTURY

● **What is a thesis?** The thesis statement is one of the (if not *the*) most important parts of your paper. It should be introduced in the first paragraph and serve as the focus of your analytic argument. Think of the thesis statement as a contract between you (the writer) and the reader. The thesis makes certain promises to your reader; it then becomes your job to fulfill that promise using specific details and analysis. The more specific your promise, the easier it will be to find specific evidence to support your argument.

Thesis statements are NOT formulas. Successful theses provoke thought, they read beautifully, they provide analysis of an idea or event, and they consider a *specific* issue. Your thesis should include three components: WHAT, HOW, and WHY: WHAT—claim about event or historical topic; HOW—the events, ideas, sources, etc. that you choose to prove your claim; WHY—the significance of your idea in terms of understanding the history/narrative as a whole (answers the extremely important “so what?” question). A thesis driven history paper begins with a research question...

● **What does a good thesis question look like?** There are many sources for questions which lead to good theses, but all seem to **pose a novel approach to their subject**. A good thesis question may result from your curious observations of primary source material, as in:

- "During World War II, why did American soldiers seem to treat Japanese prisoners-of-war more brutally than German prisoners-of-war?"
- Or, good thesis questions may challenge accepted wisdom, as in "Many people assume that Jackson's Indian policy had nothing to do with his domestic politics; are they right?"
- Finally, a good thesis question may complicate a seemingly clear-cut topic, as in "Puritans expropriated Indians' land for wealth, but were psychological factors involved as well?"

How do I start?

1. Start with a topic, such as discrimination against Japanese Americans during World War II. (Note that this is a very general area of interest. At this stage, it is utterly unguided. You cannot write a paper on this topic, because you have no path into the material.)
2. Develop a question around it, as in "why did government officials allow discrimination against Japanese Americans?" (You now have a question that helps you probe your topic; your efforts have a direction, which is answering the question you have posed for yourself. Note that there are a great many questions which you might ask of your general topic. You should expect in the course of your research to consider many such possibilities. Which ones are the most interesting? Which ones are possible given the constraints of the assignment?)
3. Develop a unique perspective on your question which answers it: Government officials allowed discrimination against Japanese Americans not because it was in the nation's interest, but because it provided a concrete enemy for people to focus on. (This is a thesis statement. You have answered the question you posed, and done so with a rather concrete and specific statement. Your answer offers a novel and thoughtful way of thinking about the material. Once the terms of the thesis are clarified [what was the "national interest"; what was the meaning and value of having "a concrete enemy for people to focus on"?], you are on your way to a solid paper.)

● **One approach to thesis construction:** After developing a hypothesis, read through it again, searching for vague words and phrases that "let you off the hook," or permit you to not make strong arguments. Underline such phrases, and re-word them to be more specific. In every un-refined thesis, there is a word or phrase which remains unclear or unexplained. Find it and "unpack" it in your introductory paragraph.

You should start thinking about possible theses from the very start of your paper preparation, but ***you need to examine your sources before you can develop a strong thesis. It is impossible to develop a good thesis without already having begun to analyze the sources which supply your evidence.*** How can you know what is even possible to argue if you haven't looked closely at your data?

In a history paper, you must state your conclusion (thesis) at the outset. But this does not mean you have to *write* it that

way. Often, you will not know exactly how you will make that complex thesis until you have gotten deeply into the material. Start your draft with a tentative thesis paragraph. Once you have written a draft of the paper, go back and re-write the thesis paragraph -- you'll have a much better sense of what you just argued, and you'll come up with a better thesis. Then go back over the body and see if it supports this complex thesis. Good writing is a process of continually evaluating your work this way -- of constantly asking yourself if your evidence and analysis supports your thesis. Remember, the thesis is not the starting point of your exploration, but the result of it.

● **Developing your thesis paragraph, the first paragraph in your paper:**

(1) The thesis, while it effectively encapsulates the argument, cannot stand alone. It requires the sentences which precede it to "set it up."

(2) The thesis paragraph not only addresses the posed research question but it introduces (and may explain) key dates/time periods and terms (disfranchisement, economic crisis, 1890s, etc.)

(3) The paragraph presents an entire argument in brief. It therefore lays out a structure for the paper. The author of this paper knows what needs to be established in the body of the paper (and hence, has an outline), and the reader has a "road map" for following the argument.

● **What does a bad thesis look like?** Here are some examples, with explanation.

The evolution trial of 1925 was made a farce and a comedy by the circumstances surrounding the trial. Behind this facade lay issues that were deeply disturbing to the Americans of the 1920s. By an examination of the Scopes Trial, some of these issues can begin to be perceived and analyzed and perhaps they can reveal a better understanding of the decade. (There is no thesis here. The last sentence seems to be a thesis, but actually speaks to the way the paper will proceed rather than to its conclusion. It does not explain why or how something happened.)

Henry David Thoreau, the author of Walden, and Theodore Parker, the unitarian minister and abolitionist, were two of the greatest minds of the antebellum period. The purpose of this paper is to examine means of resistance through a comparison of the philosophies of Thoreau and Parker. (This is a statement of purpose and method, but does not begin to offer a thesis. What is the question or problem? Comparison is a method of inquiry that leads to a thesis, not a thesis itself.)

As slaves, African Americans were given little or no rights as families. Husbands and wives were parted, and children were separated from their mothers by masters who had no qualms about selling them. Even those families kept intact were by no means protected from the hardships of slavery. Through emancipation came new opportunities and problems for African American families. (This is a little closer, but still problematic. It does assert something [emancipation brought "new opportunities and problems"] about its subject [African American families]. Yet this assertion is vague; it lacks focus and direction. More questions need to be asked: What *kind* of opportunities and problems did emancipation present? Which [opportunities or problems] were more important to the shaping of post-emancipation life? In short, the assertion made here is neither sufficiently adventurous nor specific to qualify as a good thesis.)

Some Problems with Thesis Statements

The plot summary thesis:

The Confederate soldiers gave up their weapons after General Lee surrendered to General Grant.

Proving the universal:

The U.S. Civil War was a conflict between the North and the South.

The overly general thesis:

The U.S. Civil War demonstrated that war could be very bloody. [Note: if you can plug another subject/topic into your thesis, your thesis is probably too general.]

The cliché thesis:

The U.S. Civil War proved that war is hell.

The list thesis:

The death of civilians, the destruction of cities, and the devastation of countrysides showed the extent to which the U.S. Civil War severely damaged the entire nation. [Nothing technically “wrong” with this thesis, but it’s really boring! This is a great place to *start* with a thesis statement; then expand and/or finesse the what? how? and why? components.]

The reader-response thesis (as an unhelpful way of dealing with the “so what?”):

Bell Irvin Wiley, in *The Life of Johnny Reb*, shows how the common soldier dealt with the war *to get the reader to understand* that the war was about more than politics and politicians. [All texts are addressed somehow to readers. This is not an analytical point.]

Successful thesis:

In both its geography and its brutality, the U.S. Civil War remains vastly different from other conflicts experience by Americans in the past three centuries. Specifically, the widespread impact of the war on the citizenry, the economy, and the landscape proves that the importance of the Civil War lies as much on the home front as it does on the battlefield.

Why is it successful?

- It’s specific.
- It addresses a potential contradiction and is arguable.
- It provides a logical way to structure the argument.
- It’s fairly daring intellectually and has an interesting “so what?”
- Can you identify the various components?