

Note to LITR 592 students: These are portions of a chapter from Krause's text on research writing. The actual assignment, the proposal, is at the end (Write a 3-4 page proposal that explains your working thesis. The only requirements, really, are that you must write about children's literature and you must incorporate current scholarship and critical theory into your discussion. Your research project should be part of a larger project you are pursuing—a thesis chapter, a conference paper, etc.) Use this chapter (I've cut some material) to get a basic idea of what a "working thesis" is, what an "arguable thesis" is, and what sorts of questions to consider as you write your proposal. While the proposal should clearly state a thesis, this thesis is not carved in stone and can and *should* evolve as you learn about various critical approaches and as you do more research (see the annotated bibliography assignment). --AW

## Chapter Five

# The Working Thesis Exercise

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- Working with Assigned Topics
- Coming Up with Your Own Idea
- Brainstorming for Ideas
- Brainstorming with Computers
- Moving From Ideas to Topics with the Help of the Library and the World Wide Web
- Writing Your Working Thesis
- Assignment: Writing The Working Thesis
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  - \* A Student Example: "Preventing Drunk Driving by Enforcement" by Daniel Marvins

This chapter is about finding something to write about in the first place. As I suggested earlier in the introduction and in Chapter 1, "Thinking Critically About Research," the process of finding something to write about is complicated. In many ways, you need to think critically about the idea of research, you need to go to the library or the internet and conduct research, and you need to formulate a question or thesis to research all at the same time.

Sometimes, the subject of your research is called a "research question" or "problem statement." I've decided to call this process "the working thesis" exercise to emphasize the idea that embarking on a research writing project involves making "a point" that is also a continually revised "work" in progress. A working thesis is tentative in that it will inevitably change as you go through the process of writing and researching. But if you're more comfortable thinking of the starting point of your research project as being about asking the right questions or finding the right problem, that's okay too.

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## Working With Assigned Topics

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Cut.

## Coming up with your own idea

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At other times, instructors allow students to pick a topic for their research-based writing projects. However, rarely do instructors allow their students to write research-based essays on *anything* for a lot of good reasons. For example, your composition and rhetoric course might be structured around a particular theme that you are exploring with your other reading assignments, your discussions, and your writing. Other ideas and topics don't really lend themselves to academic research writing. You probably have a special person in your life worth writing about (a parent, a grandparent, a boyfriend or girlfriend, etc.), but it is usually difficult to write a research-based essay on such a person. Some potential topics are too divisive or complex to write about in a relatively short academic research-based essay, or some are topics that have become so overly-discussed that they have become clichés.

Besides the general theme of the course and other potential limitations to ideas for research, you also need to carefully consider your *own* interests in the ideas you are thinking about researching.

If you are allowed to choose your own research project topic, *be sure to chose carefully, especially if it is a topic you will be working with throughout the term.* Don't pick a topic simply because it is the first idea that comes to mind or because you imagine it will be "easy" to research. Focus instead on an idea that meets the goals of the assignment, is researchable, and, most importantly, is a topic that you are interested in learning more about.

Taking the time to develop a good research topic *at the beginning* of the research writing process is critical. Planning ahead can be difficult and time-consuming, and it can be tempting to seize on the first idea that seems "easy." But all too often, these "easy" first ideas end up being time-consuming and difficult projects. In other words, the time you spend turning your research idea into a topic and then a working thesis will pay off when it comes time to actually write the research project assignment.

**Brainstorming section:** Cut most of section.

### Journalist Questions

One of the key elements of journalistic style is that journalists answer the basic questions of "What?" "Who?" "Where?" "When?" "How?" and "Why?" These are all good questions to consider in brainstorming for your idea, though clearly, these questions are not always equally applicable to all ideas. Here are some examples of the sort of journalistic questions you might want to ask yourself about your idea:

- What is my idea? What are the key terms of my idea?
- Who are the people involved in my idea? Who is performing the action of my topic? Who are the people affected by my idea?
- Where does my idea take place? Where did it come from? Is it restricted to a particular time and place?
- When did my idea happen? How does it relate to the other events that might have taken place at a similar time? Are there events that happened before or after my idea that might have effected it?
- How did my idea happen, or how is it still happening?
- Why did my idea happen, or why is it still happening?

## **Moving From Ideas to Topics With the Help of the Library and the World Wide Web**

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Coming up with an idea, especially using these brainstorming techniques, is not that hard to do. After all, we are surrounded by potential ideas and things that could be researched: teen violence, computer crime, high-fat diets, drugs, copyright laws, Las Vegas, dangerous toys. But it can be a little more tricky to figure out how ideas can be more specific and researchable topics. Ideas are general, broad, and fairly easy for all of us to grasp. Topics, on the other hand, are more specific, narrow, and in need of research. For example:

<b>"Idea"</b>	<b>"Topics"</b>
Computer Crime	Terrorism and the 'net, credit card fraud, computer stalking, "helpful" hackers
High-fat diets	Health risks, obesity, cholesterol, heart disease, health benefits of, weight loss from
Pharmaceutical Drugs	Cost of prescriptions, medical advances, advertising, disease prevention

In other words, a topic is a step further in the process of coming up with a researchable project for academic writing.

Chances are, your brainstorming activities have already helped you in the process of developing your idea into a topic. But before you move onto the next step of developing a working thesis, you should consider two more helpful topic developing techniques: a quick library subject search and a Web engine search.

A quick library subject search is just what it sounds like: using the computerized catalog system for your library, you can get a sense about the sort of ways other researchers have already divided up your idea into different topics.

For example, imagine your brainstorming has led you to the general idea "fisheries" and the potential problem of over-fishing in some part of the world. While this seems like it might be a potentially good and interesting thing to write about and to research, "fisheries" is an idea that could be narrowed down. If you conduct a subject search on your library's book catalog for "fisheries," you might find the library keeps track of different books in several categories. Some examples of these categories include:

- Fisheries, Atlantic Ocean.
- Fisheries, Canada.
- Fisheries, Environmental Aspects.

You might also want to use your library's periodical databases for some quick keyword searches. For example, a keyword search for "computer crime" in a periodical database returns article titles like "Demands for coverage increase as cyber-terrorism risk is realized" and "Making sense of cyber-exposures" (which are both articles about the concern businesses and insurance companies have about cyber crime), and also articles like "Meet the Hackers," an insider's view of computer hacking that disputes it being a "crime." At this point in the research process, you don't need to look up and read the sources you find, though you will probably want to keep track of them in case you end up needing them later for your research project.

Another great place to go to brainstorm ideas into topics is one of the many search engines on the World Wide Web, and you are probably already familiar with these services such as Google, Yahoo!, or alltheweb.com.

Like a quick library keyword search, doing a quick keyword search on the Web can give you some good direction about how to turn your idea into a topic. However, keep these issues in mind when conducting your Web searches:

- Search engine searches are done by computer programs, which means that they will not sort out for you what is "relevant" from what is "irrelevant" for your search.
- Most search engines and search directories offer an "advanced search" option that explains how to do a "smarter" search. Read these instructions and you will be on your way to better searches.
- Different search engines index and collect information in different ways. Therefore, you should do keyword searches with the same phrase with a few different search engines. You might be surprised how your results will differ.
- If you aren't having much luck with the keywords of your general idea, try a couple of synonyms. For example, with "computer crime," you might want to try "Internet crime," or a related term such as "computer hacking."

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## **Writing a Working Thesis**

The next step, developing a "working thesis," can be a difficult and time-consuming process. However, as was the case when considering different ideas for research in the first place, spending the time now on devising a good working thesis will pay off later.

For our purposes here (and for most college classes), **a thesis advocates a specific and debatable issue**. In academic writing (including the writing done by your professors), the thesis is often stated fairly directly in the first third or so of the writing, though not usually at the end of the first paragraph where students are often told to place it. The sentence or two that seems to encapsulate the issue of the essay is called a "thesis statement."

Frequently, theses are implied – that is, while the piece of writing clearly has a point that the reader understands, there may not be a specific sentence or two that can easily be identified as the "thesis statement." For example, theses are often implied in newspapers and magazines, along with a lot of the writing that appears on Web pages.

The point is a thesis is a point.

Theses are not statements of facts, simple questions, or summaries of events. They are positions that you as the writer take on and "defend" with evidence, logic, observations, and the other tools of discourse. Most kinds of writing – and particularly academic writing – have a thesis, directly stated or implied. Even most of the writing we largely think of as "informational" has a directly stated or implied thesis.

Theses also tend to lend a certain organization to written arguments since what you include (or exclude) in a written text is largely controlled by the thesis. The main goal of the thesis (either as a specific statement or as an implied statement) is to answer two key questions that are concerns of all readers: "what's your point?" and "why should I care?"

Now, a **working thesis** is more or less a *temporary* thesis you devise in the beginning of the research process in order to set some direction in your research. However, as I wrote in the beginning of this chapter, you should remember:

**Your working thesis is temporary and should change as you research, write, and learn more about your topic.**

Think of the working thesis as the scaffolding and bracing put up around buildings when they are under construction: these structures are not designed to forever be a part of the building. Just the opposite. But you couldn't build the building in the first place if you didn't have the scaffolding and bracing that you inevitably have to tear away from the finished building.

Here's another way of thinking of it: while the journey of 1000 miles begins with just one step (so the saying goes), you still have to pick some kind of direction in the beginning. That's the purpose of a working thesis. You might change your mind about the direction of your research as you progress through the process, but you've got to start somewhere.

What does a working thesis look like? Before considering some potentially "good" examples of working theses, read through these **BAD** examples of statements, ones that **ARE NOT** theses, at least for the purposes of academic writing:

- Computer crime is bad.
- Fisheries around the world are important.
- *The Great Gatsby* is an American novel.

None of these sentences would make effective theses because each of these is more or less a statement of fact. Of course, we could debate some of the details here. But practically speaking, most people would assume and believe these statements to be true. Because of that, these statements don't have much potential as working theses.

These statements **ARE NOT** really theses either:

- There are many controversial ways of dealing with computer crime.
- There are many things that could be done to preserve fisheries around the world.
- *The Great Gatsby* is a wonderful novel for several different reasons.

These revised working thesis statements are better than the previous examples, but they are not quite working theses yet. The problem with these possible working theses is that they are hopelessly vague and give no idea to the reader where the essay is going. Also, while these statements are a bit more debatable than the previous group of examples, they are still statements that most people would more or less accept as facts.

While this next group of statements is yet another step closer, these statements **ARE NOT** really good working theses either:

- This essay will be about the role computer hackers play in computer crime committed on the Internet.
- This essay will discuss some of the measures the international community should take in order to preserve fisheries around the world.
- My essay is about the relevance today of *The Great Gatsby's* depiction of the connection between material goods and the American dream.

Each of these statements is close to being a working thesis because each is about an idea that has been focused into a specific topic. However, these statements are not quite working thesis statements because they don't offer a position or opinion that will be defended in some way. To turn these topics into working theses, the writer needs to take a side on the issues suggested in the statements.

Now, these revised statements **ARE** examples of possible working theses:

- While some computer hackers are harmless, most of them commit serious computer crimes and represent a serious Internet security problem.
- The international community should enact strict conservation measures to preserve fisheries and save endangered fish species around the world.
- *The Great Gatsby's* depiction of the connection between material goods and the American dream is still relevant today.

If you compare these possible working theses with the statements at the beginning of this section, you will hopefully see the differences between the "bad" and "good" working theses, and hopefully you can see the characteristics of a viable working thesis.

Each of the "good" working thesis statements:

- takes a stand that is generally not considered a "fact;"
- is specific enough to give the writer and potential reader some idea as to the direction the writing will take; and
- offers an initial position on the topic that takes a stand.

Another useful characteristic of a good working thesis is that it can help you as writer to determine what your essay will **NOT** be about. For example, the phrasing of the working thesis on computer hackers suggests to both the reader and the researcher that the essay will NOT be about the failure of "dot com" business, computer literacy, or computer software. Certainly these issues are *related* to the issue of computer hackers and computer crime, but these other issues will not become the *focus* of the essay.

### **Exercise**

- Working with the topic you've chosen, create a working thesis similar to the above examples. Try to ensure that your working thesis is focused and to the point by keeping it to only one sentence. Creating a working thesis can be tricky, so be sure to devote some time to try out different possible working thesis statements. And don't forget: a working thesis is the temporary scaffolding that will help you build your essay. It will and should change in the process of writing, so it doesn't need to be "perfect" at this stage.
- After you have individually formed working theses, get together with a small group of classmates to share and revise them.

### **Assignment: Writing a Working Thesis Essay**

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The process of writing a working thesis essay can take many forms. Sometimes, topic proposals are formal essays written according to fairly strict guidelines and offering exhaustive detail. At other times, your writing about your topic might be more personal and brief in form. Here is an example of a working thesis essay assignment:

Write a brief narrative essay where you discuss the topic you have decided to research and write about. Tell your audience, your fellow classmates and your instructor how you arrived at this topic, some of the other ideas you considered in your brainstorming activities, and the working thesis you have settled on for the start of your project. Also, be sure to let us know about some of the initial library research you have conducted.

*Questions to consider as you write your first draft*

- Is the research topic one assigned by the instructor? Is it focused on a specific group of texts, questions, or ideas that have to do with a specific class?
- Are you expected to come up with your own idea for research? Since it is unlikely you will be able to write about just anything, what are some of the guidelines given to you by your instructor for what you can and can't write about?
- What are some of the ideas for research that you rejected as possibilities? Why did you reject some of these ideas?
- What are some of the research topics that make up your research idea? In other words, when you begin to narrow your idea into different topics, what are some of the different research topics that interest you?
- Given these steps in the process, what is your working thesis? What variations of your working thesis did you consider along the way?