



Developing a Thesis

What is a Thesis?

A thesis statement is a sentence or series of sentences you will write early in your essay that makes a claim that you will prove in the paragraphs that come after. The main characteristics of an effective thesis are as follows:

- ☑ An effective thesis should be **provable**—you should be able to use evidence to support your thesis statement, making it more likely that the reader will agree with you.
- ☑ An effective thesis should be **specific** and **precise**—your thesis should not be too general, but should instead make a specific claim about a broader topic.
- ☑ An effective thesis should **answer the question**—you must respond directly to the main question of the assignment you have been given.

First you must figure out what an assignment is asking you to address, and how the assignment expects you to address it. Some assignment terms that should grab your attention are: **consider, discuss, state, analyze, argue, define, agree or disagree, state your opinion, examine, explain, identify** etc. Finding these terms will help you determine what is expected of you in the paper, so it's a good idea to underline the sentences where such words appear. It is also important to recognize that professors may write assignments that use combinations of the above terms.

Getting Started

For example, an essay assignment might look like this:

In Ta-Nehisi Coates's article, he states that part of the reason he proposes reparations for black Americans is because many institutions—banks, city and state governments, civic groups—have historically locked these Americans out of wealth-building opportunities. For this essay, please explain Coates's points and state whether you agree or disagree with his proposal. In supporting your claims, you may also refer to your observations and experiences.

If this were your assignment, it would be a good idea to underline the second sentence, paying close attention to the words *explain Coates's points* and *agree or disagree with his proposal*. These would be your two main tasks and would help you focus only on what's necessary for successful completion of the assignment. Finally, to complete this assignment it would also be

necessary for you to read the assigned readings thoroughly (see the Critical Reading and Annotation handout for guidance).

Brainstorming

Once you are confident that you understand the assigned reading, it will be a good idea to brainstorm possible responses to the assignment question. These responses need to be specific enough to answer the question and give full details that help you back up your answer, effectively proving it to the reader. Below you will find a sample brainstorm in response to Ta-Nehisi Coates's article:

Coates is right to talk about reparations because neighborhood civic groups were racist.

Coates shows that banks give loans to black Americans, but these loans are often bad.

The author talks about how families got kicked out of their houses, which shows that there should be reparations.

Reparations would help many black Americans, so I agree with Coates that the government should pay reparations.

The government owes money to the families who were most affected by economic racism in American history.

None of the above responses to the assignment question could be considered a strong thesis, but no writer gets everything right the first time around (**NOTE: For a fully developed thesis, see the following page**). Every writer goes through many stages of the writing process, and developing a thesis carefully will mean that you write down many different ideas, as the writer in the notes above has done. Some of those ideas will help you, while others won't. This is a necessary step in writing a thesis.

Moving from General Ideas to a Specific Claim

The first response in the list above is provable, but there is only one reason for the statement (civic groups were racist) and that reason is not clear by itself because it does not address *how* these groups were racist. The second response is one of the supporting reasons that Coates gives for his preference for reparations. The third response is much too specific for a thesis—it is an example of actions the banks and civic groups took, and examples like this are better for the body

paragraphs. See if you can determine why the last two responses above are not sufficient in themselves.

After considering each of the above responses, a student might come up with the following thesis:

Ta-Nehisi Coates claims that for a variety of reasons the American government should pay reparations to black families. **I agree that the American government should pay reparations to black Americans because these Americans were prohibited from building wealth through buying homes. The black families being kicked out of their homes as a result of bad loans and the racist civic groups banning these families from their middle-class neighborhoods are two of the reasons why I agree with Coates. I also think that reparations could help my city thrive.**

The above thesis shows that the writer has chosen two of the reasons from the brainstormed list above and elaborated on them. By using the specific points that came out of this elaboration, the writer has also given two examples that help prove the claim that the government should pay reparations. Most importantly, the writer has answered the question directly. The two examples (families kicked out of their homes, and the discriminatory civic groups) will be expanded on in the body paragraphs that come after.