



# What, How and So What?

## Approaching the Thesis as a Process

In developing a sophisticated thesis, your goal should be to create a **concise** and **impactful** statement which grabs the reader's attention as a uniquely intriguing argument. It is not enough to merely label a phenomenon – rather strive to place your claim in a deeper context by emphasizing **how** it is supported and **why** it is significant. Thus three important questions to ask yourself are:

- *What* is my claim?
- *How* is my claim supported?
- *So what* – why does my claim matter?

If you have these bases covered, you are on your way to a well-qualified thesis. Let's look at an example of thesis evolution:

*"The changes that occurred in the wake of World War I were manifested in many aspects of American life."*

So what? Even if the reader doesn't already know this, the statement still isn't a significant assertion about the historical data. It's merely a vague observation and makes no analytical claims at all. This thesis needs to be more specific about the WHAT part of its argument.

*"The changes that occurred in the wake of World War I were manifested in many aspects of American life, from questioning old beliefs to roles in society, causing an open split between old and new."*

This thesis is definitely an improvement because it is much more specific about WHAT the changes were. But still, it doesn't address the questions HOW or SO WHAT. HOW were the "changes that occurred...manifested in many aspects of American life?" WHY were these changes significant for American society?

*"In the Wake of World War I, tension over changing social ideologies and roles were manifested in political demonstrations that reflected the growing sense of fear and uncertainty about society's new direction that would continue on well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century."*

Much better! This thesis is good because it makes an interesting, original, specific and analytical statement about the relationship between the "changing social ideologies and roles" and the "political demonstrations that reflected the growing sense of fear and uncertainty." In doing so, it addresses all of the components of the questions WHAT, HOW and SO WHAT.

**Remember:** Try to avoid making your thesis overly specific or overly general. Your claim should make a concrete assertion while also leaving room to develop your argument. Think of it as an umbrella statement. It is important to be specific, but not so narrow that there is nothing left to argue!

## Building the What, How, So What Thesis

Sometimes, even when you know your position, coming up with a thesis can be a difficult task. One way to create a thesis statement is to build it piece by piece.

First, **what** is your claim or argument?

- What is your simple answer to the prompt you've been given? Do you agree or disagree with an author? Is there an event in history or in a novel that you think is most significant? Write out this answer for yourself.

Second, **how** will you prove this claim?

- What evidence will you use to prove your position? Are you using historical events? Certain literary conventions in a novel or poem? Findings from peer-reviewed research? Anecdotes or personal experience? Think about the common thread(s) that connect the evidence you plan to use to prove your claim. Consider your evidence from an analytical perspective and try to characterize how this evidence helps you to prove your position to answer the question "how will you prove this claim." Write out this answer for yourself.

Finally, **why** does your claim matter?

- What impact does your argument have on the broader or more general issue? Why should your readers care about your position? Why do you care about your position? Why is it important to consider your perspective or process for considering this issue? What does the reader gain from your position? Any of these questions, or some combination of them, can help you determine the "so what" or relevance of your position. Write out the answer for yourself that best fits your topic.

Once you have responses for each piece of the thesis statement, you can try to put them together into one or two sentences that clearly state(s) your idea. One way to start putting your ideas together is by using the "Magic Thesis Statement." This formula is often not the best way to phrase your thesis in the end, but it is a useful tool to get yourself writing and working with the wording of your ideas.

*Through \_\_\_\_\_ (how) \_\_\_\_\_, we can see that \_\_\_\_\_ (what) \_\_\_\_\_, which is important because \_\_\_\_\_ (so what) \_\_\_\_\_.*

After you have plugged your responses into this formula, read over the sentence and consider the relationships between each element of thesis statement: How can you improve this statement to make your position clearer? How can you change the wording to better connect each part of the thesis? Do certain parts of your thesis overlap (maybe the what and how?), and is that ok? Do you need to break the thesis statement into two sentences to make sure your ideas are clearly understood?

**Remember:** Writing is a process! Don't be afraid to revise your thesis and try different ways of phrasing it. You may also want to save your final revision of your thesis until after the first draft of the essay has been written to make sure your thesis accurately reflects the arguments you make in the essay.