

# Writing Analytically

FOURTH EDITION

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Making a Thesis  
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In a good piece of writing, the thesis—the primary claim—operates as a powerful tool of discovery. Its function is to examine and question your subject to arrive at some point about its meaning that would not have been immediately obvious to your readers. The paper itself records the refining of the thesis, its central idea.

This view of the thesis as fluid and dynamic, growing and changing as it encounters evidence, goes against the way most textbooks present the thesis. They see the thesis as the finished product of an act of thinking: an inert assertion to be marched through a paper from beginning to end. But if you actually study how a thesis behaves in a piece of writing—if you track its recurrences through an essay—you'll see that a strong thesis evolves; it is not static.

This chapter will show you ways of querying your own thesis formulations and using evidence to make your thesis evolve. The payoff is that your claims will become more specific, more qualified, more true. But you'll need to get past the idea that what we call complicating evidence—data for which your thesis does not completely account—is a problem that needs to be avoided in favor of a new and simpler claim. Here's the mantra: *the complications you encounter are an opportunity to make your thesis evolve, not a problem*. Formulating a claim, seeking out conflicting evidence, and then using these conflicts to revise the claim is a primary movement of mind in analytical writing. The savvy writer will take advantage of opportunities to make apparent complications overt in order to make his or her claim respond more fully to the evidence.

The chapter contains one heuristic, Six Steps for Making a Thesis Evolve through Successive Complications, which offers a skeletal version of this process.

Before we go further, here's a quick look at the difference between good and bad thesis statements. It summarizes where we've been and points to where we're headed.

### WHAT A GOOD WORKING THESIS DOES

Promotes thinking: leads you to greater precision about what things mean  
 Reduces scope: separates useful evidence from the welter of details  
 Provides direction: helps you decide what to talk about and what to talk about next  
 Contains tension: balances *this* against *that* in a form such as "although x, nevertheless y . . ."

### WHAT A BAD THESIS DOES

Addicts you too early to a too-large idea, so that you stop actually seeing the evidence in its real-life complexity or thinking about the idea itself  
 Produces a demonstration rather than discovery of new ideas by making the same overly general point again and again about a range of evidence  
 Includes too much possible data without helping you see what's most important to talk about

### WHAT'S WRONG WITH A STATIC THESIS?

Basically, a static thesis is imprecise, overly general, and redundant. It asserts a meaning that is applied again and again as an answer, using different but similar pieces of evidence. Usually this answer is simple and single. It needs to be, because it is being asked to explain a lot, to contain so much evidence. The truth, though, is rarely either simple or single.

The static thesis—a broad label slapped on a bunch of examples—tends to produce *demonstrations*. Demonstrations point at something—"See?"—and then they're done with it. They're not interested in seeing *into* things, only looking at them from a distance to confirm a point so broad, such as "Exercise is good for you," that it was probably not worth offering as a thesis in the first place.

The staple of the demonstration form of paper writing is the five-paragraph form, which we critiqued earlier. The form predisposes the writer to begin with a BIG claim, such as "Environmentalism prevents economic growth," and then offer a paragraph on three examples (say, statutes that protect endangered wildlife, inhibit drilling for oil, and levy excessive fines on violators). Then the big claim simply gets repeated again, after a "Thus, we see . . ."

At the least, such a thesis is inaccurate. It's too easy to find exceptions to the claim and also to question what its key words actually mean. Mightn't environmentalism also promote economic growth by, say, promoting tourism? And is the meaning of economic growth self-evident? Couldn't a short-term economic boon be a long-term disaster, as might be the case for oil exploration in the polar regions?

In sum, most of what typically goes wrong in using a thesis is the result of a writer leaping too quickly to a generalization that would do as a thesis, and then treating evidence *only* as something to be mustered in support of that idea. Simply repeating the same big idea keeps things too superficial. In papers that contain a static thesis, nothing happens to the claim itself: it doesn't grow, add to our knowledge, or generate new ideas.

*Most of what typically goes wrong in using a thesis is the result of a writer leaping too quickly to a generalization that would do as a thesis, and then treating evidence only as something to be mustered in support of that idea.*

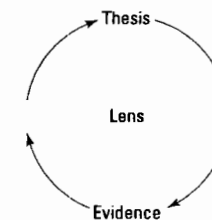
### A. EVOLVING A THESIS

#### THE RECIPROCAL RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN WORKING THESIS AND EVIDENCE: THE THESIS AS A CAMERA LENS

It's useful to think of the thesis as a camera lens that affects how we see the subject, what evidence we select, and what questions we ask about that evidence. But it's essential to understand that the subject being viewed also affects the lens. In good analytical writing, the analysis of evidence should also focus and refocus (bring about revision of) the thesis. Even in a final draft, writers are usually fine-tuning their governing idea in response to their analysis of evidence. The relationship between thesis and subject is thus *reciprocal* (see Figure 6.1).

In the terms of this analogy, very broad thesis statements, made up of imprecise (fuzzy) terms, make bad camera lenses. If your lens is insufficiently sharp, you are not likely to see much in your evidence. If you say, for example, that "the economic situation today is bad," you will at least have some sense of direction, but the imprecise terms *bad* and *economic situation* don't provide you with a focus

FIGURE 6.1 The Reciprocal Relationship Between Thesis and Evidence.



Like a lens, the thesis affects the way a writer sees evidence. Evidence should also require the writer to readjust the lens.

clear enough to distinguish significant detail in your evidence. Without significant detail to analyze, you can't develop your thesis, either by showing readers what the thesis is good for (what it allows us to understand and explain) or by clarifying its terms.

Let's take one more brief example of a fuzzy-lens thesis and lay out a few basic moves for evolving it. Say that you're looking for a trend (or strand) in contemporary films you've seen and, as a working thesis, you claim that "Women in contemporary films are represented as being more sensitive than men." To avoid a mere demonstration and instead make this thesis evolve, you would need to

- query its key terms, asking yourself what these actually mean, and
- search for data that not only matched your claim but also didn't match it.

You'd more or less be assuming that you had overstated things, and you'd be looking for ways to press yourself to make further distinctions in your initial formulation, to make it less fuzzy.

Having claimed that the films show women as more sensitive than men, ask yourself what *sensitive* means, and by what criteria you are assessing its presence and absence. Is the overt expression of tender feelings the only acceptable evidence for being sensitive? Couldn't men have less demonstrative ways of being sensitive? What is the best piece or two of evidence that men do show something like sensitivity in the films you're considering?

And surely you could also complicate that claim by locating it within a richer *context*. It's not enough to assert that women are represented as sensitive in the films. What are these films inviting us to think about their sensitivity? Are the women punished for it in the plots? Are they rewarded with being liked (approved of) by the films, even if this trait causes them problems?

Such considerations as these would require significant *reformulation* of the thesis. This procedure will normally be repeated several times, with each new discussion of significant evidence. For this reason you may find it useful to think of the claim-making aspect of a piece of writing not simply as a thesis, which implies that it is a settled thing, but rather as a *working thesis*, which suggests that the claim is in process, metamorphosing through a series of contexts within the paper.

*The term working thesis suggests that the claim is in process, not static.*

By the end of the paper, the claim that "women are more sensitive than men" should have evolved into a more carefully defined and qualified statement that reflects the thinking you have done in your analysis of evidence. This is what good concluding paragraphs do; they reflect back on and reformulate your paper's initial position in light of the thinking you have done about it (see Figure 6.2).

You might ask, Isn't this reformulating of the thesis something a writer does *before* he or she writes the essay? Certainly some of it is accomplished in your exploratory drafting and note taking, and your revision process should weed out

FIGURE 6.2 Evolving thesis diagram



A strong thesis evolves as it confronts and assimilates evidence; the evolved thesis may expand or restrict the original claim. The process may need to be repeated a number of times.

various false starts and dead ends. But your finished paper should include the evolutions of your thesis. To an extent, all good writing re-creates the chains of thought that lead writers to their conclusions. If you just listed your conclusions, your readers might rightly question how you arrived at them. The main routes of your movement from a tentative idea to a refined and substantiated theory should remain visible for readers to follow. (See "The Evolving Thesis in a Final Draft" later in this chapter for further discussion of how much thesis evolution to include in your final draft.)

#### A FIRST NOTE ON THE SHAPE OF THESIS STATEMENTS

Before we move on to concentrated applications of the procedure for making a thesis evolve, take a look back at the shape of the imprecise thesis statements used as examples in this chapter:

Environmentalism prevents economic growth.

The economic situation today is bad.

Women in contemporary films are represented as being more sensitive than men.

All three are simple, declarative sentences that offer very abstract assertions. That is, they are both grammatically and conceptually simple. More than that, they're *slack*—especially the first two, which stand alone, not in relation to anything else.

The very *shape* of these weak thesis statements is a warning sign. Most effective working theses, though they may begin more simply, achieve both grammatical and conceptual complexity as they evolve. Such theses contain tension, the balance of this against that; this degree, with that qualification. Often they begin with *although* or incorporate *however* or use an *appears to be about x but is actually about y* kind of formulation. Here, by contrast to the weak theses above, are three possible evolutions of the "sensitivity" thesis:

Although women cry more readily in contemporary films, the men, by not crying, seem to win the audience's favor.

The complications that fuel the plots in today's romantic comedies arise because women and men express their sensitivity so differently; the resolutions, however, rarely require the men to capitulate.

A spate of recent films has witnessed the emergence of the new "womanly" man as hero, and not surprisingly, his tender qualities seem to be the reason he attracts the female love interest.



### Try this 6.1: Qualifying Overstated Claims

Using as a model of inquiry the treatment of the example thesis “Women in contemporary films are represented as being more sensitive than men,” seek out complications in one of the overstated claims in the following list. These complications might include conflicting evidence (which you should specify) and questions about the meaning or appropriateness of key terms (again, which you should exemplify). Illustrate a few of these complications, and then reformulate the claim in language that is more carefully qualified and accurate.

Welfare encourages recipients not to work.

Midwives are more caring than gynecologists.

Religious people are more moral than those who are not religious.

School gets in the way of education.

Herbal remedies are better than pharmaceutical ones.

The book is always better than the film.

#### PROCEDURE FOR MAKING THE THESIS EVOLVE THROUGH SUCCESSIVE COMPLICATIONS: THE EXAMPLE OF *EDUCATING RITA*

This section of the chapter presents an extended example that illustrates how the initial formulation of a thesis might evolve—through a series of complications—over the course of a draft. It closely follows in organization the “Six Steps for Making a Thesis Evolve.”

Let’s consider the stages you might go through within a more finished draft to evolve a thesis about a film. In *Educating Rita*, a working-class English hairdresser (Rita) wants to change her life by taking courses from a professor (Frank) at the local university, even though this move threatens her relationship with her husband (Denny), who burns her books and pressures her to quit school and get pregnant. Frank, she discovers, has his own problems: he’s a divorced alcoholic who is bored with his life, bored with his privileged and complacent

#### SIX STEPS FOR MAKING A THESIS EVOLVE

1. Formulate an idea about your subject—a working thesis.
2. See how far you can make this thesis go in accounting for (confirming) evidence.
3. Locate complicating evidence that is not adequately accounted for by the thesis.
4. Make explicit the apparent mismatch between the thesis and selected evidence, asking and answering So what?
5. Reshape your claim to accommodate the evidence that hasn’t fit.
6. Repeat steps 2, 3, 4, and 5 several times.

students, and bent on self-destruction. The film follows the growth of Frank and Rita’s friendship and the changes it brings about in their lives. By the end of the film, each has left a limiting way of life behind and has set off in a seemingly more promising direction. She leaves her constricting marriage, passes her university examinations with honors, and begins to view her life in terms of choices; he stops drinking and sets off, determined but sad, to make a new start as a teacher in Australia.

Formulate an idea about your subject, a working thesis (step 1).

**Working thesis:** *Educating Rita* celebrates the liberating potential of education.

The film’s relatively happy ending and the presence of the word *educating* in the film’s title make this thesis a reasonable opening claim.

See how far you can make this thesis go in accounting for evidence (step 2). The working thesis seems compatible, for example, with Rita’s achievement of greater self-awareness and independence. You would go on to locate similar data that would support the idea that education is potentially liberating. She becomes more articulate, which allows her to free herself from otherwise disabling situations. She starts to think about other kinds of work she might do, rather than assuming that she must continue in the one job she has always done. She travels, first elsewhere in England and then to the Continent. So, the thesis checks out as viable: there is enough of a match with evidence to make it worth pursuing.

Locate evidence that is not adequately accounted for by the thesis and ask So what? about the apparent mismatch between the thesis and selected evidence (steps 3 and 4). Other evidence troubles the adequacy of the working thesis, however: Rita’s education causes her to become alienated from her husband, her parents, and her social class; at the end of the film she is alone and unsure about her direction in life. In Frank’s case, the thesis runs into even more problems. His boredom, drinking, and alienation seem to have been caused, at least in part, by his education rather than by his lack of it. He sees his book-lined study as a prison. Moreover, his profound knowledge of literature has not helped him control his life: he comes to class drunk, fails to notice or care that his girlfriend is having an affair with one of his colleagues, and asks his classes whether it is worth gaining all of literature if it means losing one’s soul.

Reshape your claim to accommodate the evidence that hasn’t fit (step 5). *Question: What are you to do?* You cannot convincingly argue that the film celebrates the liberating potential of education, because that thesis ignores such a significant amount of the evidence. Nor can you “switch sides” and argue that the film attacks education as life-denying and disabling, because this thesis is also only partially true.

*What not to do.* Faced with evidence that complicates your thesis, you should not assume that it is worthless and that you need to start over from scratch. View the “problem” you have discovered as an opportunity to modify your thesis rather than abandon it. After all, the thesis still fits a lot of significant evidence. Rita is arguably better off at the end of the film than at the beginning: we are not left to believe that she should have remained resistant to education, like her husband, Denny, whose world doesn’t extend much beyond the corner pub.

*What to do.* Make apparent complications explicit—the film’s seemingly contradictory attitudes about education—and then modify the wording of your thesis in a way that might resolve or explain these contradictions. You might, for example, be able to resolve an apparent contradiction between your initial thesis (the film celebrates the liberating potential of education) and the evidence by proposing that there is more than one version of education depicted in the film. You would, in short, start qualifying and clarifying the meaning of key terms in your thesis.

In this case, you could divide education as represented by the film into two kinds: enabling and stultifying. The next step in the development of your thesis would be to elaborate on how the film seeks to distinguish true and enabling forms of education from false and debilitating ones (as represented by the self-satisfied and status-conscious behavior of the supposedly educated people at Frank’s university).

**Revised thesis:** *Educating Rita* celebrates the liberating potential of enabling—in contrast to stultifying—education.

Repeat steps 2, 3, 4, and 5 (step 6). Having refined your thesis in this way, you would then repeat the step of seeing what the new wording allows you to account for in your evidence. The revised thesis might, for example, explain Frank’s problems as being less a product of his education than of the cynical and pretentious versions of education that surround him in his university life. You could posit further that, with Rita as inspiration, Frank rediscovers at least some of his idealism about education.

What about Frank’s emigration to Australia? If we can take Australia to stand for a newer world, one where education would be less likely to become the stale and exclusive property of a self-satisfied elite, then the refined version of the thesis would seem to be working well. In fact, given the possible thematic connection between Rita’s working-class identity and Australia (associated, as a former frontier and English penal colony, with lower-class vitality as opposed to the complacency bred of class privilege), the thesis about the film’s celebration of the contrast between enabling and stultifying forms of education could be sharpened further. You might propose, for example, that the film presents institutional education as desperately in need of frequent doses of “real life” (as represented by Rita and Australia)—infusions of working-class pragmatism, energy, and optimism—if it is to remain healthy and open, as opposed to becoming the oppressive property of a privileged social class. This is to say that the film arguably exploits stereotypical assumptions about social class.

**Revised thesis:** *Educating Rita* celebrates the liberating potential of enabling education, defined as that which remains open to healthy doses of working-class, real-world infusions.

Similarly, you can make your supporting ideas (those on which your thesis depends) more accurate and less susceptible to oversimplification by seeking evidence that might challenge their key terms. Sharpening the language of your supporting assertions will help you develop your thesis.

Consider, for example, the wording of the supporting idea that *Educating Rita* has a happy ending. Some qualification of this idea through consideration of possibly conflicting evidence could produce an adjustment in the first part of the working thesis, that the film celebrates education and presents it as liberating. At the end of the film, Frank and Rita walk off in opposite directions down long, empty airport corridors. Though promising to remain friends, the two do not become a couple. This closing emphasis on Frank’s and Rita’s alienation from their respective cultures, and the film’s apparent insistence on the necessity of each going on alone, significantly qualifies the happiness of the “happy ending.”

Once you have complicated your interpretation of the ending, you will again need to modify your thesis in accord with your new observations. Does the film simply celebrate education if it also presents it as being, to some degree, incompatible with conventional forms of happiness? By emphasizing the necessity of having Frank and Rita each go on alone, the film may be suggesting that to be truly liberating, education—as opposed to its less honest and more comfortable substitutes—inevitably produces and even requires a certain amount of loneliness and alienation. Shown in Figure 6.3 are the successive revisions of the thesis.

**Final version of thesis:** *Educating Rita* celebrates the liberating potential of enabling education (kept open to real-world, working-class energy) but also acknowledges its potential costs in loneliness and alienation.

### Try this 6.2: Tracking a Thesis

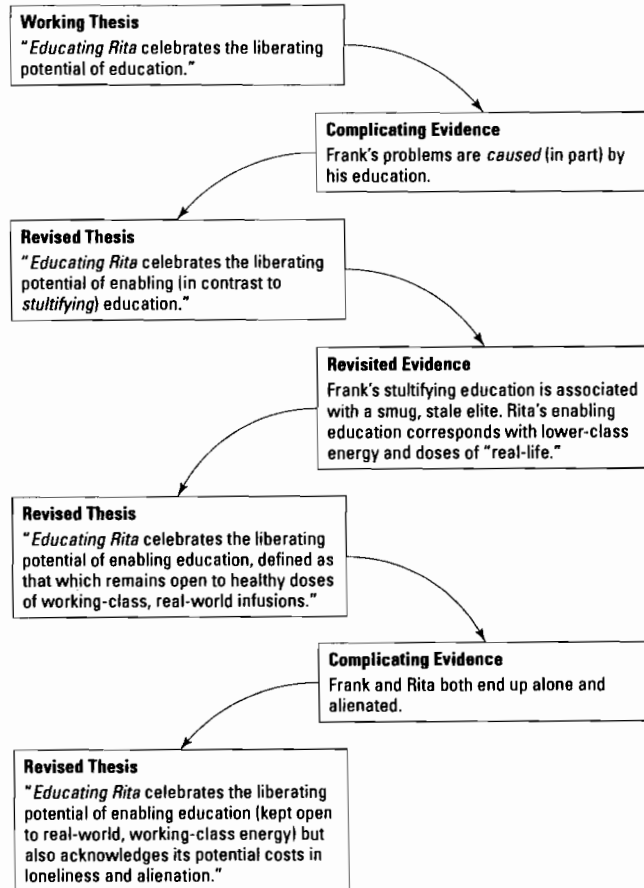
As should be clear now, various versions of the thesis recur throughout a piece of writing, usually with increasing specificity, complication, and grammatical complexity. The four thesis statements on *Educating Rita* illustrate this pattern of recurrence clearly. One of the best ways to teach yourself how and where to locate statements of the thesis in your own writing is to track the thesis in a piece of reading. Ideally you should choose an essay or article used in one of your courses, because this exercise will also powerfully increase your understanding of the reading. Use a highlighter to mark the evolutions. Where in the essay do you find the thesis? How has it changed in each recurrence? In response to what complication?

## B. USING THE EVOLVING THESIS TO ORGANIZE THE FINAL DRAFT

Having achieved a final version of a thesis, *what next?* Why wouldn’t a writer just offer the last and fullest statement of the thesis in his or her first paragraph and then prove it?

Usually it’s neither possible nor desirable to encapsulate in the opening sentences what it will actually take the whole paper to explain. The position articulated in the fully evolved thesis is typically too complex to be stated intelligibly and concisely in the introduction. But more, if you think of an essay as an

FIGURE 6.3 Successive Revisions of a Thesis.



An initial thesis about *Educating Rita* evolves through successive complications as it reexamines evidence in the film.

act of thinking, then the evolutions of the thesis record the history of your various changes in thinking as you confronted evidence. If your readers get to see these, they are far more likely to go along with you, literally to follow your trains of thought.

Before treating these matters in more detail, however, let us nail down a general answer to the question of thesis locations.

- The first articulation of the working thesis almost always occurs late in the opening paragraph or early in the second paragraph of a piece, after the

writer has presented the problem or question that establishes the tension the thesis aims to resolve, and given some kind of context for it.

- Subsequent articulations of the thesis usually occur at points of transition, typically at paragraph openings following the analysis of complicating evidence. These thesis evolutions are often overtly marked as such—the writer tells readers that on the basis of this analysis, it is necessary to amend the governing claim. This kind of explicit updating has the added benefit of providing unity to the essay, using the thesis as a kind of spine.
- The final statement of the thesis occurs in the concluding paragraph, or perhaps the penultimate one. It is usually offered in clear relationship to the terms offered in the introduction, so the reader is offered a last vision of where the essay has traveled.

*If you think of an essay as an act of thinking, then the evolutions of the thesis record the history of your various changes in thinking as you confronted evidence.*

A more complete answer to the questions of where and how to locate versions of the thesis in a final draft involves two related issues: (1) the location of the thesis statement in relation to the conventional shapes of argument—induction and deduction—and (2) the customary location of the thesis according to the protocols (ways of proceeding) of different disciplines. We will treat each of these in its turn.

#### THE EVOLVING THESIS AND COMMON THOUGHT PATTERNS: DEDUCTION AND INDUCTION

Put simply, in a deductive paper a fairly full-fledged version of the thesis appears at the beginning; in an inductive paper, it appears at the end (see Figure 6.4, A and B).

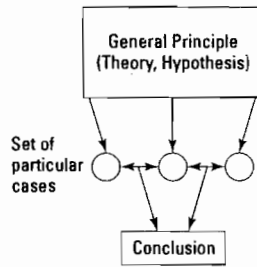
As a thought process, deduction reasons from a general principle (assumed to be true) to the particular case. It introduces this principle up front and then uses it to select and interpret evidence. For example, a deductive paper might state in its first paragraph that attitudes toward and rules governing sexuality in a given culture can be seen, at least in part, to have economic causes. The paper might then apply this principle, already assumed to be true, to the codes governing sexual behavior in several cultures or several kinds of sexual behavior in a single culture.

A good deductive argument is, however, more than a mechanical application or matching exercise of general claim and specific details that are explained by it. Deductive reasoning uses the evidence to draw out the implications—what logicians term *inferring the consequences*—of the claim. The general principle explains selected features of particular cases, and *reciprocally*, the evidence brings out implications in the principle.

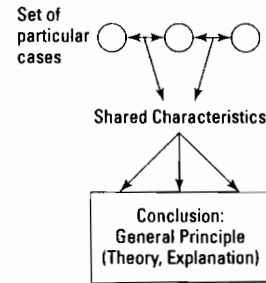
Thus, the general principle stated at the beginning of the paper and the idea stated as the paper's conclusion are not the same. Rather, the conclusion presents the (evolved) idea that the writer has arrived at through the application of the principle.

FIGURE 6.4 Deduction and Induction.

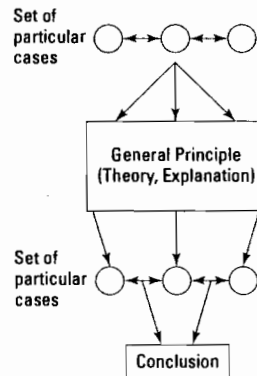
## (A) Deduction



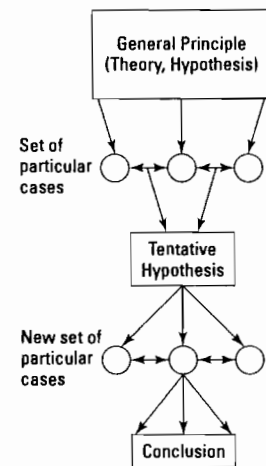
## (B) Induction



## (C) Blend: Induction to Deduction



## (D) Blend: Deduction to Induction



Deduction (A) uses particular cases to exemplify general principles and analyze their implications. Induction (B) constructs general principles from the analysis of particular cases. In practice, analytical thinking and writing blend deduction and induction and start either with particular cases (C) or a general principle (D).

An inductively organized paper typically begins not with a principle already accepted as true but with particular data for which it seeks to generate some explanatory principle.

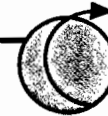
Whereas deduction moves by applying a generalization to particular cases, induction moves from the observation of individual cases to the formation of a general principle. Because all possible cases can obviously never be

examined—every left-handed person, for example, if one wishes to theorize that left-handed people are better at spatial thinking than right-handers—the principle (or thesis) arrived at through inductive reasoning always remains open to doubt.

Nevertheless, the thesis of an inductive paper is generally deemed acceptable if a writer can demonstrate that the theory is based on a reasonably sized sampling of representative instances. (This matter of representativeness was taken up in our earlier discussion of 10 on 1.) Suffice it to say that a child who arrives at the thesis that all orange food tastes bad on the basis of squash and carrots has not based that theory on an adequate sampling of available evidence.

What we hope this discussion makes clear is that whether your analysis is primarily inductive or deductive, the thesis will undergo evolution as it confronts evidence. What still needs to be understood, though, is that in most cases induction and deduction operate in tandem (see Figure 6.4, C and D). It's true that in some disciplines (philosophy, for example) the deductive pattern of argument prevails, but not exclusively: the analysis of evidence, though clearly designed to reflect a general principle, will also lead to new formulations that will modify the general principle in various ways.

It is in the nature of analysis to move between the particular and the general, regardless of which comes first. Whether the overall shape of the analysis—its mode of progression—is primarily inductive or deductive, it will still *gain in complexity* from beginning to end. The statement with which you begin is not also the end (see Figure 6.4).



### Try this 6.3: Formulating an Inductive Principle

Study a group of like things inductively. You might, for example, use greeting cards aimed at women versus greeting cards aimed at men, a group of poems by one author, or ads for one kind of product (jeans) or aimed at one target group (teenage girls).

Make use of the looking-for-patterns heuristic (see the Method in Chapter 2) to compile and organize a set of significant details about the data, and then leap to a general claim about the group that you think is interesting and reasonably accurate. This generalization is your inductive principle. Then use the principle to examine deductively more data of the same kind, exploring its implications as you evolve it more accurately.

### THE EVOLVING THESIS AS HYPOTHESIS AND CONCLUSION IN THE NATURAL AND SOCIAL SCIENCES

A thesis functions differently depending on the academic discipline—whether it must be stated in full at the outset, for example, and what happens to it between the beginning of the paper and the end. The differences appear largest as you move back and forth between courses in the humanities and courses in the natural and certain of the social sciences.



## VOICES FROM ACROSS THE CURRICULUM

### The Hypothesis in the Sciences

It should go without saying that if the empirical evidence doesn't confirm your hypothesis, you rethink your hypothesis, but it's a complex issue. Researchers whose hypotheses are not confirmed in fact often question their *method* ("if I had more subjects," or "a better manipulation of the experimental group," or "a better test of intelligence," etc.) as much as their hypothesis. And that's often legitimate. Part of the challenge of psychological research is its reliance on a long array of assumptions. Failure to confirm a hypothesis could mean a problem in any of that long array of assumptions. So failure to confirm your hypothesis is often difficult to interpret.

—Alan Tjeltveit, Professor of Psychology

The thesis in Experimental Psychology papers is the statement of the hypothesis. It is always carefully and explicitly stated in the last few sentences of the introduction. The hypothesis is usually a deductive statement such as, If color does influence mood, then an ambiguous picture printed on different colors of paper should be interpreted differently, depending on the color of the paper. Specifically, based on the results of Jones (1997), the pink paper should cause participants to perceive the picture as a more calm and restful image, and the green paper should cause the picture to be interpreted as a more anxious image.

—Laura Snodgrass, Professor of Psychology

The thesis is usually presented in the abstract and then again at the end of the introduction. Probably the most frequent writing error is not providing a thesis at all. Sometimes this is because the student doesn't have a thesis; other times it is because the student wants to maintain a sense of mystery about the paper, as if driving toward a dramatic conclusion. This actually makes it harder to read. The best papers are clear and up front about what their point is, then use evidence and argument to support and evaluate the thesis. I encourage students to have a sentence immediately after their discussion of the background on the subject that can be as explicit as "In this paper I will argue that although research on toxic effects of methyl bromide provides troubling evidence for severe physiological effects, conclusive proof of a significant environmental hazard is lacking at this time."

I try to avoid the use of the term *hypothesis*. I think it gives the false sense that scientists always start with an idea about how something works. Frequently, that is not the case. Some of the best science has actually come from observation. Darwin's work on finches is a classic example. His ideas about adaptation probably derived from observation.

—Bruce Wightman, Professor of Biology

Economists do make pretense to follow scientific methodology. Thus we are careful not to mix hypothesis and conclusion. I think it's important to distinguish between what is conjectured, the working hypothesis, and what ultimately emerges as a result of an examination of the evidence. Conclusions come only after some test has been passed.

—James Marshall, Professor of Economics

Broadly speaking, papers in the humanities are inclined to begin inductively, and papers in the natural and social sciences deductively. The natural and social sciences generally use a pair of terms, *hypothesis* and *conclusion*, for the single term *thesis*. Because writing in the sciences is patterned according to the scientific method, writers in disciplines such as biology and psychology must report how the original thesis (hypothesis) was tested against empirical evidence and then conclude on this basis whether or not the hypothesis was confirmed.

The gap between this way of thinking about the thesis and the concept of an evolving thesis is not as large as it may seem. The scientific method is in sync with one of the chapter's main points, that something must happen to the thesis between the introduction and the conclusion, so that the conclusion does more than just reassert what was already asserted in the beginning.

Analogously, in a scientific paper, the hypothesis is tested against evidence, the results of which allow the writer to draw conclusions about the hypothesis's validity. Although the hypothesis does not change (or evolve), the testing of it and subsequent interpretation of those results produce commentary on and, often, qualifications of the paper's central claim.

In the natural and social sciences, successive reformulations of the thesis are less likely to be recorded and may not even be expressly articulated. But, as in all disciplines, the primary analytical activity in the sciences is to repeatedly reconsider the assumptions upon which a conclusion is based.

### THE EVOLVING THESIS AND INTRODUCTORY AND CONCLUDING PARAGRAPHS

If you are not using the hypothesis/conclusion format, your final drafts could often begin by predicting the evolution of their theses. Thus, the *Educating Rita* paper might open by using a version of the seems-to-be-about-*x* gambit, claiming that at first glance the film seems to celebrate the liberating potential of education. You could then lay out the evidence for this view and proceed to complicate it in the ways we've discussed.

What typically happens is that you lead (usually at the end of the first paragraph or at the beginning of the second) with the best version of your thesis that you can come up with that will be understandable to your readers without a lengthy preamble. If you find yourself writing a page-long introductory paragraph to get to your initial statement of thesis, try settling for a simpler articulation of your central idea in its first appearance. As you move through the paper, substantiate, elaborate on, test, and qualify your paper's opening gambit.

## VOICES FROM ACROSS THE CURRICULUM

## Recognizing Your Thesis

For an analytical or interpretive historical essay, *thesis* is a conventional term and one of much value. The thesis usually is that point of departure from the surfaces of evidence to the underlying significance, or problems, a given set of sources reveal to the reader and writer. In most cases, the thesis is best positioned up front, so that the writer's audience has a sense of what lies ahead and why it is worth reading on. I say *usually* and *in most cases* because the hard and fast rule should not take precedence over the inspirational manner in which a thesis can be presented. But the inspiration is not to be sought after at the price of the thesis itself. It is my experience, in fact, that if inspiration strikes, one realizes it only after the fact.

Recognizing a thesis can be extremely difficult. It can often be a lot easier to talk "about" what one is writing than to say succinctly what the thrust of one's discussion is. I sometimes ask students to draw a line at the end of a paper after they have finished it, and then write one, at most two sentences, saying what they most want to tell their readers. My comment on that postscript frequently is "Great statement of your thesis. Just move it up to your first paragraph."

—Ellen Poteet, Professor of History

The most important thing to do in the introductory paragraph of an analytical paper is to lay out a genuine issue, which is to say, something that seems to be at stake in whatever you are studying. Ideally, you should select a complex issue—one not easily resolved, seeming to have some truth on both sides—and not an overly general one. Otherwise you run the risk of writing a paper that proves the obvious or radically oversimplifies.

Set up this issue as quickly and concretely as you can, avoiding generic (fits anything) comments, throat clearing, and review-style evaluations. As a general rule, you should assume that readers of your essay will need to know on page 1—preferably by the end of your first paragraph—what your paper is attempting to resolve or negotiate.

The first paragraph does not need to—and usually can't—offer your conclusion; it will take the body of your paper to accomplish that. It should, however, provide a quick look at particular details that set up the issue. Use these details to generate a theory, a *working hypothesis*, about whatever it is you think is at stake in the material. The rest of the paper will test and develop this theory.

Your concluding paragraph will offer the more carefully qualified and evolved version of your thesis that the body of your paper has allowed you to arrive at. Rather than just summarize and restate what you said in your introduction, the concluding paragraph should leave readers with what you take to be your single best insight, and it should put what you have had to say into some kind of perspective. See Chapter 8 for a more extended discussion of introductions and conclusions.

## Recognizing and Fixing Weak Thesis Statements

### Quick Take

This chapter will teach you how to recognize the difference between good thesis statements—statements that make claims that need proving—and weak thesis statements. Weak thesis statements have in common the fact that they don't give the writer enough to do in his or her essay. Typically a weak thesis is an unproductive claim because it doesn't actually require further thinking or proof, as, for example, in the case of "The jeans industry targets its advertisements to appeal to young adults" (probably a statement of fact that doesn't need proving) or "An important part of one's college education is learning to better understand others' points of view" (a piece of conventional wisdom that most people would already accept as true, and thus not in need of arguing).

Solutions? Be suspicious of your first responses to a subject. Privilege live questions over inert answers. Find ways to bring out the complexity of your subject. Look again at "What It Means to Have an Idea" in Chapter 1, which tells you to start with something puzzling that you want to figure out rather than with something you already believe to be clearly and obviously true. When in doubt, do more exploratory writing to trigger better ideas.

### A. FIVE KINDS OF WEAK THESES AND HOW TO FIX THEM

A *strong thesis* makes a claim that (1) requires analysis to support and evolve it and (2) offers some point about the significance of your evidence that would not have been immediately obvious to your readers. By contrast, a *weak thesis* either makes no claim or makes a claim that does not need proving. As a quick flash-forward, here are the five kinds of weak thesis statements—ones that

1. make no claim ("This paper will examine the pros and cons of . . .");
2. are obviously true or are a statement of fact ("Exercise is good for you");
3. restate conventional wisdom ("Love conquers all");
4. offer personal conviction as the basis for the claim ("Shopping malls are wonderful places"); and
5. make an overly broad claim ("Individualism is good").

## WEAK THESIS TYPE 1: THE THESIS MAKES NO CLAIM

The following statements are not productive theses because they do not advance an idea about the topics the papers will explore.

## Problem Examples

I'm going to write about Darwin's concerns with evolution in *The Origin of Species*.

This paper will address the characteristics of a good corporate manager.

Both problem examples name a subject and link it to the intention to write about it, but they don't make any claim about the subject. As a result, they direct neither the writer nor the reader toward some position or plan of attack. The second problem example begins to move toward a point of view through the use of the value judgment *good*, but this term is too broad to guide the analysis. The statement-of-intention thesis invites a list: one paragraph for each quality the writer chooses to call good. Even if the thesis were rephrased as "This paper will address why a good corporate manager needs to learn to delegate responsibility," the thesis would not adequately suggest why such a claim would need to be argued or defended. *There is, in short, nothing at stake, no issue to be resolved.* A writer who produces a thesis of this type is probably unduly controlled by a relatively passive, information in/information out approach to learning.

**Solution** Raise specific issues for the essay to explore.

## Solution Examples

Darwin's concern with survival of the fittest in *The Origin of Species* initially leads him to neglect a potentially conflicting aspect of his theory of evolution—survival as a matter of interdependence.

The very trait that makes for an effective corporate manager—the drive to succeed—can also make the leader domineering and therefore ineffective.

Some disciplines expect writers to offer statements of method and/or intention in their papers' openings. Generally, however, these openings also make a claim: for example, "In this paper I will examine how congressional Republicans undermined the attempts of the Democratic administration to legislate a fiscally responsible health care policy for the elderly," *not* "In this paper I will discuss America's treatment of the elderly." (See Chapter 8, "Introductions and Conclusions," for further discussion of using overt statements of intention.)

## WEAK THESIS TYPE 2: THE THESIS IS OBVIOUSLY TRUE OR IS A STATEMENT OF FACT

The following statements are not productive theses because they do not require proof. A thesis needs to be an assertion with which it would be possible for readers to disagree.

## Problem Examples

The jeans industry targets its advertisements to appeal to young adults.

The flight from teaching to research and publishing in higher education is a controversial issue in the academic world. I will show different views and aspects concerning this problem.

If few people would disagree with the claim that a thesis makes, there is no point in writing an analytical paper on it. Though one might deliver an inspirational speech on a position that virtually everyone would support (such as the value of tolerance), endorsements and appreciations don't usually lead to analysis; they merely invite people to feel good about their convictions.

In the second problem example, few readers would disagree with the fact that the issue is "controversial." In the second sentence of that example, the writer has begun to identify a point of view—that the flight from teaching is a "problem"—but her next declaration, that she will "show different views and aspects," is a statement of fact, not an idea. The phrasing of the claim is noncommittal and so broad that it prevents the writer from formulating a workable thesis. If you find yourself writing theses of this type, review the discussion of the problems with generalizing in Chapter 1.

**Solution** Find some avenue of *inquiry*—a question about the facts or an issue raised by them. Make an assertion with which it would be possible for readers to disagree.

## Solution Examples

By inventing new terms, such as *loose fit* and *relaxed fit*, the jeans industry has attempted to normalize, even glorify, its product for an older and fatter generation.

The "flight from teaching" to research and publishing in higher education is a controversial issue in the academic world. As I will attempt to show, the controversy is based to a significant degree on a false assumption, that doing research necessarily leads teachers away from the classroom.

## WEAK THESIS TYPE 3: THE THESIS RESTATES CONVENTIONAL WISDOM

Restatement of one of the many clichés that constitute a culture's conventional wisdom is not a productive thesis unless you have something to say about it that hasn't been said many times before.

## Problem Examples

An important part of one's college education is learning to better understand others' points of view.

From cartoons in the morning to adventure shows at night, there is too much violence on television.

"I was supposed to bring the coolers; you were supposed to bring the chips!" exclaimed ex-Beatle Ringo Starr, who appeared on TV commercials for Sun Country Wine Coolers a few years ago. By using rock music to sell a wide range of products, the advertising agencies, in league with corporate giants such as Pepsi, Michelob, and Ford, have corrupted the spirit of rock 'n' roll.

All of these examples say nothing worth proving because they are clichés. (Conventional wisdom is a polite term for cliché.) Most clichés were fresh ideas

once, but over time they have become trite, prefabricated forms of nonthinking. Faced with a phenomenon that requires a response, many inexperienced writers rely on a knee-jerk reaction: they resort to a small set of culturally approved “answers.” In this sense, clichés resemble statements of fact. So commonly accepted that most people nod to them without thinking, statements of conventional wisdom make people feel a comfortable sense of agreement with one another. The problem with this kind of packaged solution is that because conventional wisdom is so general and so conventional, it doesn’t teach anybody—including the writer—anything. Worse, because the cliché appears to be an idea, it prevents the writer from engaging in a fresh, open-minded exploration of his or her subject.

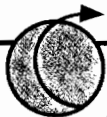
There is some truth in all of the problem examples above, but none of them *complicates* its position. A thoughtful reader could, for example, respond to the claim that advertising has corrupted the spirit of rock ‘n’ roll by suggesting that rock ‘n’ roll was highly commercial long before it colonized the airwaves. The conventional wisdom that rock ‘n’ roll is somehow pure and honest whereas advertising is phony and exploitative invites the savvy writer to formulate a thesis that overturns these clichés. As our solution example demonstrates, one could argue that rock actually has improved advertising, not that ads have ruined rock—or, alternatively, that rock has shrewdly marketed idealism to a gullible populace. At the least, a writer deeply committed to the original thesis would do better to examine what Ringo was selling—what he stands for in this particular case—than to discuss rock and advertising in such general terms.

**Solution** Seek to complicate—see more than one point of view on—your subject. Avoid conventional wisdom unless you can qualify it or introduce a fresh perspective on it.

#### Solution Examples

Although an important part of one’s college education is learning to better understand others’ points of view, a persistent danger is that students will simply be required to substitute their teachers’ answers for the ones they grew up believing uncritically.

Although some might argue that the presence of rock ‘n’ roll sound tracks in TV commercials has corrupted rock’s spirit, this point of view not only falsifies the history of rock but also blinds us to the ways that the music has improved the quality of television advertising.



#### Try this 7.1: Revising Weak Thesis Statements

You can learn a lot about writing strong thesis statements by analyzing and rewriting weak ones. Rewrite the three weak theses that follow. As in the case of our solution examples, revising will require you to add information and thinking to the weak theses. Try, in other words, to come up with some interesting claims that most readers would not already have thought of to develop the subject of television violence. (The third thesis you will recognize as a problem example for which we offered no solution.)

1. In this paper I will discuss police procedures in recent domestic violence cases.
2. The way that the media portrayed the events of April 30, 1975, when Saigon fell, greatly influenced the final perspectives of the American people toward the end result of the Vietnam War.
3. From cartoons in the morning to adventure shows at night, there is too much violence on television.

#### WEAK THESIS TYPE 4: THE THESIS OFFERS PERSONAL CONVICTION AS THE BASIS FOR THE CLAIM

A statement of one’s personal convictions or one’s likes or dislikes does not alone supply sufficient grounds for a productive thesis.

#### Problem Examples

The songs of the punk rock group Minor Threat relate to the feelings of individuals who dare to be different. Their songs are just composed of pure emotion. Pure emotion is very important in music, because it serves as a vehicle to convey the important message of individuality. Minor Threat’s songs are meaningful to me because I can identify with them.

Sir Thomas More’s *Utopia* proposes an unworkable set of solutions to society’s problems because, like communist Russia, it suppresses individualism.

Although I agree with Jeane Kirkpatrick’s argument that environmentalists and business should work together to ensure the ecological future of the world, and that this cooperation is beneficial for both sides, the indisputable fact is that environmental considerations should always be a part of any decision that is made. Any individual, if he looks deeply enough into his soul, knows what is right and what is wrong. The environment should be protected because it is the right thing to do, not because someone is forcing you to do it.

Like conventional wisdom, personal likes and dislikes can lead inexperienced writers into knee-jerk reactions of approval or disapproval, often expressed in a moralistic tone. The writers of the problem examples above assume that their primary job is to judge their subjects or testify to their worth, not to evaluate them analytically. As a result, such writers lack critical detachment not only from their topics but, crucially, from their own assumptions and biases. They have *taken personal opinions for self-evident truths*. You can test a thesis for this problem by asking if the writer’s response to questions about the thesis would be “because I think so.”

The most blatant version of this tendency occurs in the third problem example, which asserts, “Any individual, if he looks deeply enough into his soul, knows what is right and what is wrong. The environment should be protected because it is the right thing to do.” Translation (only slightly exaggerated): “Any individual who thinks about the subject will obviously agree with me because my feelings and convictions feel right to me, and therefore they must be universally and self-evidently true.” The problem is that this writer is not distinguishing between his own likes and dislikes (or private convictions) and what he takes to be right, real, or true for everyone else. Testing an idea against your own feelings and experience is not an adequate means of establishing whether something is accurate or true.

**Solution** Try on other points of view honestly and dispassionately; treat your ideas as hypotheses to be tested rather than obvious truths. In the following solution examples, we have replaced opinions (in the form of self-evident truths) with ideas—theories about the meaning and significance of the subjects that could be supported and qualified with evidence.

*Treat your ideas as hypotheses to be tested rather than obvious truths.*

#### Solution Examples

Sir Thomas More's *Utopia* treats individualism as a serious but remediable social problem. His radical treatment of what we might now call "socialization" attempts to redefine the meaning and origin of individual identity.

Although I agree with Jeane Kirkpatrick's argument that environmentalists and business should work together to ensure the ecological future of the world, her argument undervalues the necessity of pressuring businesses to attend to environmental concerns that may not benefit them in the short run.

It is fine, of course, to write about what you believe and to consult your feelings as you formulate an idea. But the risk you run by arguing from your unexamined feelings and convictions is that you will prematurely dismiss from consideration anything that is unfamiliar or does not immediately conform to what you already believe. The less willing you are to test these established and habitual convictions, the less chance you will have to refine or expand the ways in which you think. You will continue to play the same small set of tunes in response to everything you hear. And without the ability to think from multiple perspectives, you will be less able to defend your convictions against the ideas that challenge them, because you won't really have examined the logic of your own beliefs—you just believe them.

At the root of this problem lurks an anti-analytical bias that predisposes many writers to see any challenge to their habitual ways of thinking as the enemy and to view those who would raise this challenge as cynics who don't believe in anything. Such writers often feel personally attacked, when in fact the conviction they are defending is not really so personal after all. Consider, for example, the first two problem examples above, in which both writers take individualism to be an incontestable value. Where does this conviction come from? Neither of the writers arrived at the thesis independent of the particular culture in which they were raised, permeated as it is by the "rugged individualism" of John Wayne and Sylvester Stallone movies.

In other words, *individualism* as an undefined blanket term verges on *cultural cliché*. That it is always good or positive is a piece of conventional wisdom. But part of becoming educated is to take a look at such global and undefined ideas that one has uncritically assimilated. Clearly, the needs and rights of the individual in contemporary American culture are consistently being weighed and balanced against the rights of other individuals and the necessity of cooperation in groups. Look at the recent nationwide concerns with health maintenance organizations (HMOs), which control health costs but constrain the individual

prerogative of the physician, or with the rights of crime victims who are banding together to seek support from a government they believe is protecting the individual rights of the criminal at the expense of the individual rights of the victim.

In light of these considerations, the writers of the first two problem examples would have to question *to what extent* they should attack a book or support a rock band merely on the basis of whether or not each honors individualism. If the author of the second problem example had been willing to explore how Thomas More conceives of and critiques individualism, he or she might have been able to arrive at a revealing analysis of the tension between the individual and the collective rather than merely dismissing the entire book.

This is not to say that the first requirement of analytical writing is that you abandon all conviction or argue for a position you do not believe. But we are suggesting that the risk of remaining trapped within a limited set of culturally inherited opinions is greater than the risk that you will run by submerging your personal likes or dislikes and instead honestly and dispassionately trying on different points of view. The energy of analytical writing comes not from rehearsing your convictions but from treating them as hypotheses to be tested, as scientists do—from finding the boundaries of your ideas, reshaping parts of them, and seeing connections you have not seen before.

When a writing assignment asks for your ideas about a subject, it is usually not asking for your opinion, what you think *of* the subject, but for your reasoning on what the subject means. As we discussed in the first chapter, *an idea is not the same thing as an opinion*. The two are closely related, because both, in theory, are based on reasoning. Opinions, however, often take the form of judgments, the reflections of our personal attitudes and beliefs. Although having ideas necessarily involves your attitudes and beliefs, it is a more disinterested process than opinion making. The formulation of ideas, which is one of the primary aims of analysis, involves questioning. By contrast, opinions are often habitual responses, mental reflexes that kick in automatically when an answer seems to be called for. (The discussions of personalizing, judging, and opinions in Chapter 1 explain more fully how placing too much emphasis on yourself can interfere with your thinking.)

#### VOICES FROM ACROSS THE CURRICULUM

##### Ideas Versus Opinions

Writers need to be aware of the distinction between an argument that seeks support from evidence, and mere opinions and assertions. Many students taking political science courses often come with the assumption that in politics one opinion is as good as another. (Tocqueville thought this was a peculiarly democratic disease.) From this perspective any position a political science professor may take on controversial issues is simply his or her opinion to be accepted or rejected by students according to their own beliefs/prejudices. The key task, therefore, is not so much the substitution of knowledge for opinions, but substituting well-constructed arguments for unexamined opinions.

What is an argument and how might it be distinguished from opinions? Several things need to be stressed: (1) The thesis should be linked to evidence drawn from relevant sources: polling data, interviews, historical material, and so forth. (2) The thesis should make as explicit as possible its own ideological assumptions. (3) A thesis, in contrast to mere statement of opinion, is committed to making an argument, which means that it presupposes a willingness to engage with others. To the extent that writers operate on the assumption that everything is in the end an opinion, they have no reason to construct arguments; they are locked into an opinion.

—Jack Gambino, Professor of Political Science

#### WEAK THESIS TYPE 5: THE THESIS MAKES AN OVERLY BROAD CLAIM

An overly general claim is not a productive thesis because it oversimplifies and is too broad to direct development. Such statements usually lead either to saying nothing theses or to reductive either/or thinking. (See “Working with Categorical Thinking” later in the chapter.)

##### Problem Examples

Violent revolutions have had both positive and negative results for man.

There are many similarities and differences between the Carolingian and the Burgundian Renaissances.

*Othello* is a play about love and jealousy.

It is important to understand why leaders act in a leadership role. What is the driving force? Is it an internal drive for the business or group to succeed, or is it an internal drive for the leader to dominate others?

Overly generalized theses avoid complexity. (See the discussion of generalizing in Chapter 1.) At their worst, as in our first three examples, they settle for assertions broad enough to fit almost any subject and thus say nothing in particular about the subject at hand. A writer in the early stages of his or her drafting process might begin working from a general idea, such as what is positive and negative about violent revolutions or how two historical periods are like and unlike, but these formulations are not specific enough to guide the development of a paper. Such broad categories are likely to generate listing, not thinking. We can, for example, predict that the third thesis will prompt the writer to produce a couple of paragraphs demonstrating that *Othello* is about love and then a couple of paragraphs demonstrating that *Othello* is about jealousy, without analyzing what the play says about either.

Our fourth problem example, inquiring into the motivation of leaders in business, demonstrates how the desire to generalize can drive writers into logical errors. Because this thesis overtly offers readers two possible answers to its central question, it appears to avoid the problem of oversimplifying a complex subject. But this appearance of complexity is deceptive, because the writer has

reduced the possibilities to only two answers—an either/or choice: is “the driving force” of leadership a desire for group success or a desire to dominate others? Readers can only be frustrated by being asked to choose between two such options when the more logical answer probably lies somewhere in between or somewhere else altogether. (See the discussion of binaries in Chapters 2 and 3.)

The best way to avoid the problem evident in the first three examples is to sensitize yourself to the characteristic phrasing of such theses: “both positive and negative,” “many similarities and differences,” or “both pros and cons.” Virtually everything from meat loaf to taxes can be both positive and negative.

**Solution** Convert broad categories and generic (fits anything) claims to more specific, more qualified assertions; find ways to bring out the complexity of your subject.

##### Solution Examples

Although violent revolutions begin to redress long-standing social inequities, they often do so at the cost of long-term economic dysfunction and the suffering that attends it.

The differences between the Carolingian and Burgundian Renaissances outweigh the similarities.

Although *Othello* appears to attack jealousy, it also supports the skepticism of the jealous characters over the naïveté of the lovers.

#### B. HOW TO REPHRASE THESIS STATEMENTS: SPECIFY AND SUBORDINATE

Clear symptoms of an overly generalized thesis can be found by looking at its grammar. Each of the first three problem examples for Weak Thesis Type 5, for example, relies mostly on nouns rather than verbs; the nouns announce a broad heading, but the verbs don’t do anything with or to the nouns. In grammatical terms, these thesis statements don’t *predicate* (affirm or assert something about the subject of a proposition). Instead, they rely on anemic verbs such as *is* or *are*, which function as equal signs that link general nouns with general adjectives rather than specify more complex relationships.

By replacing the equal sign with a more active verb, you can force yourself to advance some sort of claim, as in one of our solutions; for example, “The differences between the Carolingian and Burgundian Renaissances *outweigh* the similarities.” Although this reformulation remains quite general, it at least begins to direct the writer along a more particular line of argument. Replacing the *is* or *are* equal signs with stronger verbs will usually impel you to rank ideas in some order of importance and to assert some conceptual relation among them.

In other words, the best way to remedy the problem of overgeneralization is to move toward specificity in word choice, in sentence structure, and in idea. If you find yourself writing “The economic situation is bad,” consider revising it to “The tax policies of the current administration threaten to reduce the tax burden on the middle class by sacrificing education and health-care programs for everyone.”

Here's the problem/solution in schematic form:

<b>Broad Noun</b> The economic situation	+ <b>Weak Verb</b> is	+ <b>Vague, Evaluative Modifier</b> bad
<b>Specific Noun</b> (The) tax policies (of the current administration)	+ <b>Active Verb</b> threaten to reduce (the tax burden on the middle class)	+ <b>Specific Modifier</b> by sacrificing education and health-care programs for everyone

By eliminating the weak thesis formula—broad noun plus *is* plus vague evaluative adjective—a writer is compelled to qualify, or define carefully, each of the terms in the original proposition, arriving at a more particular and conceptually rich assertion.

A second way to rephrase overly broad thesis statements, in tandem with adding specificity, is to subordinate one part of the statement to another. The both-positive-and-negative and both-similarity-and-difference formulas are recipes for say-nothing theses because they encourage pointless comparisons. Given that it is worthwhile to notice both strengths and weaknesses—that your subject is not all one way or all another—what can you do to convert the thesis from a say-nothing to a say-something claim? Generally, there are two strategies for this purpose that operate together. The first we have already discussed.

1. *Specify*—Replace the overly abstract terms—terms such as *positive* and *negative* (or *similar* and *different*)—with something specific; *name* something that is positive and something that is negative instead.
2. *Subordinate*—Rank one of the two items in the pairing underneath the other. When you subordinate, you put the most important, pressing, or revealing side of the comparison in what is known as the main clause and the less important side in what is known as the subordinate clause, introducing it with a word such as *although*. (See Chapter 11 for the definitions of main and subordinate clauses.)

In short, specify to focus the claim, and subordinate to qualify (further focus) the claim still more. This strategy produces the remedies to both the *Othello* and the violent revolution examples in “Weak Thesis Type 5: The Thesis Makes an Overly Broad Claim.” As evidence of the refocusing work that fairly simple rephrasing accomplishes, consider the following version of the violent revolution example, in which we merely invert the ranking of the two items in the pair.

Although violent revolutions often cause long-term economic dysfunction and the suffering that attends it, such revolutions at least begin to redress long-standing social inequities.

Also see the section titled “A First Note on the Shape of Thesis Statements” in Chapter 6.

## VOICES FROM ACROSS THE CURRICULUM

### Making the Thesis Specific

*Good thesis:* “Although Graham and Wigman seem different, their ideas on inner expression (specifically subjectivism versus objectivism) and the incorporation of their respective countries’ surge of nationalism bring them much closer than they appear.”

*Not-so-good thesis/question:* “What were Humphrey’s and Weidman’s reasons behind the setting of *With My Red Fires*, and of what importance were the set and costume design to the piece as a whole?”

What I like about the good thesis is that it moves beyond the standard “they are different, but alike” (which can be said about anything) to actually tell the reader what specific areas the paper will explore. I can also tell that the subject is narrow enough for a fairly thorough examination of one small slice of these two major choreographers’ work rather than some overgeneralized treatment of these two historic figures. I would probably encourage the writer of the not-so-good thesis to search for a better thesis with the question, How does the costume design of *With My Red Fires* support this story of young lovers and their revolt against the family matriarch?

—Karen Dearborn, Professor of Dance

### ANOTHER NOTE ON THE PHRASING OF THESIS STATEMENTS: QUESTIONS

The following question is frequently asked about thesis statements: is it okay to phrase a thesis as a question? The answer is both yes and no. Phrasing a thesis as a question makes it more difficult for both the writer and the reader to be sure of the direction the paper will take, because a question doesn’t make an overt claim. Questions, however, can clearly imply claims. And many writers, especially in the early, exploratory stages of drafting, begin with a question. As we note in the discussion “What It Means to Have an Idea” in Chapter 1, an idea answers a question; it explains something that needs to be explained. Also, an idea may result from the discovery of a question where there seemed not to be one. Ideas start with something you want to figure out rather than with something that you and possibly most of your readers already understand.

As a general rule, use thesis questions cautiously, especially in final drafts. Although a thesis question often functions well to spark a writer’s thinking, it can too often muddy the thinking by leaving the area of consideration too broad. Just make sure you do not let the thesis-question approach allow you to evade the responsibility of making some kind of claim.



### Try this 7.2: Determining What the Thesis Requires You to Do Next



Learning to diagnose the strengths and weaknesses of thesis statements is a skill that comes in handy as you read the claims of others and revise your own. A good question for diagnosing a thesis is, What does the thesis require the writer to do next? This question should help you figure out what the thesis actually wants to claim, which can then direct you to possible rephrasings that would better direct your thinking. Using this question as a prompt, list the strengths and weaknesses of the two thesis statements below, and then rewrite them. In the first statement, rewrite just the last sentence (the other sentences have been included to provide context).

1. Many economists and politicians agree that, along with the Environmental Protection Agency's newest regulations, a global-warming treaty could damage the American economy. Because of the great expense that such environmental standards require, domestic industries would financially suffer. Others argue, however, that severe regulatory steps must be taken to prevent global warming, regardless of cost. Despite both legitimate claims, the issue of protecting the environment while still securing our global competitiveness remains critical.
2. Regarding the promotion of women into executive positions, they are continually losing the race because of a corporate view that women are too compassionate to keep up with the competitiveness of a powerful firm.

## C. WORKING WITH CATEGORICAL THINKING

Categorical thinking is an unavoidable and distinctive feature of how all human beings go about analyzing a subject. It is also extremely useful: to generalize from particular experiences, we try to put them into meaningful categories. When we contract an illness, doctors diagnose it by type. When we study personality theory, different behaviors are grouped by personality type. Subject areas in school are categorized into divisions: the natural sciences, the social sciences, the humanities. Analytical thought is quite unthinkable without categories.

But categorical thinking can also be dangerous. It can mislead us into oversimplification when the categories are too broad or too simply connected. This is especially the case with the either/or choices to which categorical thinking is prone: approve/disapprove, real/unreal, accurate/inaccurate, believable/unbelievable. Such either/or thinking often provokes thinkers into a premature and overly narrow decision either to support the subject or to denounce it. This rush to value judgment can so dominate a writer's attention that he or she fails to examine not only the values upon which the judgment is based, but also the subject itself.

If you look back over the examples in "Five Kinds of Weak Theses," you will notice that a number of them engage in the dangerous side of categorical thinking. That is, they are overly global—inclined to all-or-nothing claims. The writer who

evaluates leadership in terms of its selflessness/selfishness, for example, needs to pause to consider why we should evaluate leadership in those terms in the first place.

Many weak theses are the result of oversimplified categorical thinking. The writer puts everything into big, undifferentiated categories, labeled all black or all white, with nothing in between. The trick is to use categorical thinking in a way that allows you to make careful distinctions.

### TWO WAYS TO IMPROVE THE LOGIC OF YOUR THESIS STATEMENTS

We will refer to the following two examples to illustrate two key ways to strengthen the logic of your thesis statements: (1) by qualifying your claims and (2) by checking for the unstated assumptions upon which your claims depend.

**Example I:** I think there are many things shown on TV that are damaging for people to see. But there is no need for censorship. No network is going to show violence without the approval of the public, obviously for financial reasons. What must be remembered is that the public majority will see what it wants to see in our mass society.

**Example II:** Some members of our society feel that [the televised cartoon series] *The Simpsons* promotes wrong morals and values for our society. Other members find it funny and entertaining. I feel that *The Simpsons* has a more positive effect than a negative one. In relation to a real-life marriage, Marge and Homer's marriage is pretty accurate. The problems they deal with are not very large or intense. As for the family relationships, the Simpsons are very close and love each other.

**Qualifying Overextended Claims** The main problem with Example I is the writer's failure to qualify his ideas, a problem that causes him to generalize to the point of oversimplification. Note the writer's habit of stating his claims absolutely (we have italicized the words that make these claims unqualified):

"there is no need for censorship"

"no network is going to show violence without"

"obviously for financial reasons"

"what must be remembered"

"the majority will see"

Broad, pronouncement-like claims are difficult to support fairly. The solution is for the writer to limit his claims more carefully, especially his key premise about public approval. The assertion that a commercial television industry will, for financial reasons, give the public "what it wants" is true *to an extent*. But, as with the "extent to which" strategy for refocusing binaries (see Chapter 3), the solution here is to modify this claim as well as consider other possibilities.

Couldn't it also be argued, for example, that given the power of television to shape people's tastes and opinions, the public sees not just what it wants but what it has been taught to want? This necessary complication of the writer's argument about public approval seriously undermines the credibility of his global assertion that "there is no need for censorship." The remedy lies with qualifying his thesis. Simply reversing it to "there is a need for censorship" would not solve the

problem, because the need for defining and limiting the writer's position will be just as great on the other side of the issue.

Example II appears to be more qualified than Example I (because it acknowledges the possibility of at least two points of view). The writer opens by attempting to acknowledge the existence of more than one point of view on the show, and rather than broadly asserting that the show is positive and accurate, she tempers these claims (as italics show): "I *feel* that *The Simpsons* has a *more* positive effect *than* a negative one"; Marge and Homer's marriage is *pretty* accurate." These qualifications, however, are superficial. The writer does not explore what *accurate* means. Instead, she assumes the standard of accuracy (that an accurate show is a good show) as a given.

**Checking for Unstated Assumptions** Before she could persuade us to approve of *The Simpsons* for its accuracy in depicting marriage, the writer of Example II would have to convince us that accuracy is a reasonable criterion for evaluating TV shows (especially cartoons) rather than simply accepting it as an unstated assumption. Would an accurate depiction of the life of a serial killer, for example, necessarily make for a "positive" show? Similarly, if a fantasy show has no interest in accuracy, is it necessarily "negative" and without moral value?

When writers present a debatable premise as if it were self-evidently true, the conclusions built upon it cannot stand. At the least, the writer of Example II needs to recognize her debatable premise, articulate it, and make an argument in support of it. She might also precede her judgment about the show with more analysis. Before deciding that the show is "more positive than negative" and thus does not promote "wrong morals and values for our society," she could convey what the show has to say about marriage, how it goes about making this statement, and why (in response to what).

**When writers present a debatable premise as if it were self-evidently true, the conclusions built upon it cannot stand.**

Likewise, if the writer of Example I had looked at his own claims rather than rushing to argue an absolute position on censorship, he would have noticed how much of the thinking that underlies them remains unarticulated and thus unexamined. His argument that "there is no need for censorship," for example, depends on the validity of another of his assertions, that "no network is going to show violence without the approval of the public, obviously for financial reasons." The writer's argument depends on readers' accepting a position that he asserts ("obviously") as though it were too clearly true to need defending.

Spelling out the issue of the networks' financial dependence on public approval would help this writer clarify and qualify his thesis. It would also allow him to sort out the logical contradiction with his opening claim that "there are many things shown on TV that are damaging for people to see." If television networks will broadcast only what the public approves of, then apparently the public must approve of being damaged or fail to notice that it is being damaged. If the public either fails to notice it is being damaged or approves of it, aren't these credible arguments for, rather than against, censorship?

## CLOSE READING VERSUS DEBATE-STYLE ARGUMENT

To formulate a revealing and insightful idea—an effective thesis—you may have to alter some of your conceptions of what writing is supposed to do. The agree/disagree mode of writing and thinking that you will often see in editorials, hear in the media, and even practice sometimes in school may incline you to focus all your energy on the bottom line—aggressively advancing a claim either for or against some view—without first engaging in the exploratory interpretation of evidence that is so necessary to arriving at thoughtful arguments.

Writing, especially as it is used in school, is often divided into kinds. And clearly, the kind of writing this book addresses—analysis—differs in both method and aim from, say, descriptive writing or narration. Those of you who have been taught to write arguments may find that some of the prescriptions we offer on analytical writing seem to run counter to what you've learned. Our aim in this section is to break down unnecessary divisions between argument and analysis, proposing that the interpretive skill called close reading is essential to both.

A close reading explicates (unfolds) an interpretation by making selected features of your subject explicit that otherwise might not be readily recognized or understood. A close reading moves beyond the obvious, but it does not leap to some hidden meaning that is unconnected to the evidence. Rather, it follows logically from the evidence; the meaning is implicit in the details, waiting to be brought out by the writer who is careful enough to look closely and questioningly.

It is, we believe, a common misconception that interpretation (close reading) goes on only in art or literature courses, whereas science, social science, and philosophy courses require a different kind of writing called argument. Many of you will have been introduced to writing arguments through the debate-model—writing pro or con on a given position, with the aim of defeating an imagined opponent and convincing your readers of the rightness of your position. But as the *American College Dictionary* says, "to argue implies reasoning or trying to understand; it does not necessarily imply opposition." It is this more exploratory, tentative, and dispassionate mode of argument that this book encourages you to practice.

Adhering to the more restrictive, debate-style definition of argument can create a number of problems for careful analytical writers:

1. By requiring writers to be oppositional, it inclines them to discount or dismiss problems in the side or position they have chosen; they cling to the same static position rather than testing it as a way of allowing it to evolve.
2. It inclines writers to either/or thinking rather than encouraging them to formulate more qualified positions that integrate apparently opposing viewpoints.
3. It overvalues convincing someone else at the expense of developing understanding.

Too often interpretation and argument are treated as essentially different kinds of writing, each with a particular purpose. In practice, interpretation and argument are inseparable. As our examples in Chapter 6 show, even the most tentative and cautiously evolving interpretation is ultimately an argument; it asks readers to accept a particular interpretation of a set of data. And like argument, interpretation carefully connects evidence with claims; it does not, as it is

sometimes misconceived, incline the writer toward undirected and purposeless impressionism.

Similarly, even the most passionately committed argument is an interpretation; its credibility rests on the plausibility of its reading of evidence. You cannot argue from evidence unless you are first sure that you know what that evidence means. Most illogical argument occurs when writers assume that the meaning of their data is self-evident. In other words, you need to analyze your subject dispassionately before you can fairly argue a position about it.

Analysis is an important corrective to narrow and needlessly oppositional thinking. A writer who is skeptical of global generalizations and of unexamined value judgments may sound timid and even confused compared with the insistent pronouncements of daytime talk shows and televised political debates. But the effort you put into carefully formulating your ideas by qualifying them, checking for unstated assumptions, and acknowledging rather than ignoring problems in your position will make you a stronger writer and thinker. For more discussion of debate-style argument see the “Counterproductive Habits of Mind” section in Chapter 1.

#### D. COMMON LOGICAL ERRORS IN CONSTRUCTING A THESIS

In further service to our project of giving you ways of avoiding weak thesis statements, this section will move briefly to the field of logic, which has given us terms that are shorthand for certain common thinking errors. We will treat six errors, all of which involve the root problem of oversimplification in the way the thesis explains the meaning of evidence.

1. **Simple cause–complex effect**—One of the most common problems of thinking, the fallacy of simple cause–complex effect, involves assigning a simple cause to a complex phenomenon that cannot be so easily explained. A widespread version of this fallacy is seen in arguments that blame individual figures for broad historical events. For example, “Eisenhower caused America to be involved in the Vietnam War.” This claim ignores the cold war ethos, the long history of colonialism in Southeast Asia, and a multitude of other factors. When you reduce a complex sequence of events to a simple and single cause—or assign a simple effect to a complex cause—you will virtually always be wrong.
2. **False cause**—Another common cause/effect thinking error, false cause, is produced by assuming that two events are causally connected when such a connection does not necessarily exist. One of the most common forms of this fallacy—known as *post hoc, ergo propter hoc* (Latin for “after this, therefore because of this”)—assumes that because *A* precedes *B*, *A* causes *B*. For example, it was once thought that the sun shining on a pile of garbage caused the garbage to conceive flies.

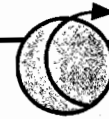
This error is the stuff that superstition is made of. “I walked under a ladder, and then I got hit by a car” becomes “Because I walked under a ladder, I got hit by a car.” Because one action precedes a second one, the first action is assumed to be the cause of the second. A more dangerous form of this error goes like this:

**Evidence:** A new neighbor moved in downstairs on Saturday. My television disappeared on Sunday.

**Conclusion:** The new neighbor stole my TV.

As the examples illustrate, typically in false cause some significant alternative has not been considered, such as the presence of flies’ eggs in the garbage. Similarly, it does not follow that if a person watches television and then commits a crime, television watching necessarily causes crime; there are other causes to be considered.

#### Try this 7.3: Identifying Logical Errors and Formulating Alternative Explanations



Predictably, instances of simple cause/complex effect and false cause are harder to spot when we encounter them in published settings. Identify possible sites of simple cause/complex effect and false cause in the following real-life example. Then formulate a few alternative explanations that one might offer to the theory that television watching is the primary cause of the increased risk of starting drinking. What cause-and-effect explanations might there be for the decreased risk of drinking that corresponds with adolescents watching movies on a VCR?

A newspaper article on a study conducted at Stanford University about the connection between adolescents’ television-viewing habits and drinking reports that high school students who watch a lot of television and music videos are more likely to start drinking than are other students. In the study of 1,553 ninth graders, with each increase of one hour per day of watching music videos there was a 31 percent greater risk of starting to drink. Each hour increase of watching other kinds of television corresponded with a 9 percent greater risk. Each hour spent watching movies in a video cassette recorder corresponded to an 11 percent decreased risk of starting to drink alcohol. Computer and video games had no effect either way, and among those who already drank, watching television and videos made no difference. Because these data were reported in the newspaper in very abbreviated form, there was little interpretation of the evidence except for the observations that alcohol is the most common beverage shown on television and that drinking on television is done by attractive people, often in association with sexually suggestive content.

3. **Analogy and false analogy**—An analogy is a device for understanding something that is relatively foreign in terms of something that is more familiar. When you argue by analogy, you are saying that what is true for one thing is also true for something else that it in some way resembles. The famous poetic line “my love is like a red, red rose” is actually an argument by analogy. At first glance, this clichéd comparison seems too far-fetched to be reasonable. But is it a false analogy, or a potentially

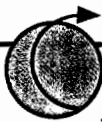
enabling one? Past users of this analogy have thought the thorns, the early fading, the beauty, and so forth sufficient to argue from the comparison. Similarly, glance back to the first paragraph of the Tiananmen Square essay on page 151 in Chapter 5 in which the writer's deft use of an extended analogy opens up his subject analytically. Analogies, in short, are not bad or illogical in themselves. In fact, they can be incredibly useful, depending on how you handle them.

The danger that arguing analogically can pose is that an *inaccurate* comparison (usually one that oversimplifies) prevents you from looking at the evidence. Flying to the moon is like flying a kite? Well, it's a little like that, but this kind of oversimplification is essentially falsifying. In most ways that matter, sending a rocket to the moon does not resemble sending a kite into the air.

Another way that an analogy can become false is when it becomes overextended: there is a point of resemblance at one juncture, but the writer then goes on to assume that the two items being compared necessarily resemble each other in most other respects. To what extent is balancing your checkbook really like juggling? On the other hand, an analogy that first appears overextended may not be. How far, for example, could you reasonably go in comparing a presidential election to a sales campaign or an enclosed shopping mall to a village main street?

Let's examine one more false analogy, from a recent ad campaign: "You choose the president; why not choose your cable company?" What's wrong with this comparison? For one thing, each of us is not entitled to our choice of president. If we were, there would be a lot of presidents. And, second, the rules and circumstances covering what is best in the nation's communication network are not necessarily the same as the rules and circumstances guiding the structure of our federal government. So the analogy doesn't work very well. What is true for one side of the comparison is not necessarily true for the other side; the differences are greater than the similarities.

When you find yourself reasoning by analogy, ask yourself two questions: (1) are the basic similarities greater and more significant than the obvious differences? and (2) am I overrelying on surface similarities and ignoring more essential differences?



#### Try this 7.4: Observing Analogies

We observed at the beginning of this book that one of the best ways of improving your thinking is to become more aware of yourself doing it. To put this observation into practice, here's something you might try. Keep a record during the course of a single day of the number of times you or others around you (in conversation, in the newspaper, on the radio, at work, in the classroom, and so forth) make use of analogy. In some cases a single word will reveal that a common phrase, such as *nuclear*

*family* is actually an analogy. At the end of the day, look over your list and isolate the most appropriate and insightful analogy as well as the most distorting one. If possible, share them with someone else (or a small group) who has been doing the same thing.

You might profitably spend another day doing this same exercise looking for examples of simple cause/complex effect and *post hoc ergo propter hoc*. (If you don't find an astonishing number of these, listen harder!)

**4. Equivocation**—Equivocation is the first of three logical errors that deal with matters of phrasing. As Chapter 6 and this chapter show, finding and developing a thesis emphasizes the importance of word choice—of carefully casting and recasting the language with which you categorize and name your ideas.

Equivocation—slipping between two meanings for a single word or phrase—confuses an argument. An example would be "Only man is capable of religious faith. No woman is a man. Therefore, no woman is capable of religious faith." Here the first use of *man* is generic, intended to be gender neutral, whereas the second use is decidedly masculine. One specialized form of equivocation results from what are sometimes called *weasel words*. A weasel word is one that has been used so loosely that it ceases to have much (or any) meaning. (The term derives from the weasel's reputed practice of sucking the contents from an egg without destroying the shell.) The word *natural*, for example, can mean "good, pure, and unsullied," but it can also refer to the ways of nature (flora and fauna). Such terms (*love, reality, and experience* are others) invite equivocation because they mean so many different things to different people.

**5. Begging the question**—To beg the question is to argue in a circle by asking readers to accept without argument a point that is actually at stake. This kind of fallacious argument hides its conclusion among its assumptions. For example, "*Huckleberry Finn* should be banned from school libraries as obscene because it uses obscene language" begs the question by presenting as obviously true issues that are actually in question: the definition of obscenity and the assumption that the obscene should be banned because it is obscene.

**6. Overgeneralization**—An overgeneralization is an inadequately qualified claim. It may be true that some heavy drinkers are alcoholics, but it would not be fair to claim that all heavy drinking indicates or leads to alcoholism. As a rule, be wary of "totalizing" or making global pronouncements; the bigger the generalization, the more likely it will admit of exceptions. See for examples the process of qualifying a claim we illustrate in the discussion of *Educating Rita* in Chapter 6 and in the solutions in "Weak Thesis Type 5" in this chapter.

One particular form of overgeneralization, the *sweeping generalization*, occurs when a writer overextends the reach of the claim. The claim itself

may be adequately qualified, but the problem comes in an overly broad application of that generalization, suggesting that it applies in every case, whereas it applies only in some.

When you move prematurely from too little evidence to a broad conclusion, you have fallen into *hasty generalization*. Much of this book addresses ways of avoiding this problem, also known as an unwarranted inductive leap. See “Demonstrating the Representativeness of Your Example” in Chapter 5.

There are, of course, other common logical errors that can undermine the construction of valid claims. For one more example, see the section called “Strategy 3: Put Your Sources into Conversation with One Another” in Chapter 12 for a discussion of the problem in an argument called *straw man*, in which a writer builds his or her case on a misrepresentation of an opponent’s argument.

#### ASSIGNMENT: “Love Is the Answer”—Analyzing Clichés

It’s not necessarily that clichés are untrue, just that they are not worth saying (even if you’re John Lennon, who offered this sodden truism in one of his more forgettable tunes).

One of the best ways to inoculate yourself against habitually resorting to clichés to provide easy and safe answers to all the problems of the planet—easy because they fit so many situations generically, and safe because, being so common, they *must* be true—is to go out and collect them, and then use this data gathering to generate a thesis. Spend a day doing this, listening and looking for clichés—from overheard conversations (or your own), from reading matter, from anywhere (talk radio and TV are exceptionally rich resources) that is part of your daily round.

Compile a list, making sure to write down not only each cliché but the context in which it is used. From this data, and applying what you have learned from the two thesis chapters, formulate a thesis and write a paper about one or more of the clichés that infect some aspect of your daily life. You might find it useful to use the reading-for-pattern heuristic to identify key shared traits among the clichés and/or among the contexts in which you have discovered them. And you might apply the advice provided under “Weak Thesis Type 3” to work out alternative formulations to certain clichés to discover what that might teach us about the ways clichés function in given situations—how, for example, they do and don’t fit the facts of the situation. If you can find a copy of Paul Muldoon’s short poem “Symposium,” that might anchor an analysis—what is that poem telling us about cliché?—or provide a lens for uncovering aspects of your data. ▀

1. Your thesis should make a claim with which it would be possible for readers to disagree. In other words, move beyond defending statements that your readers would accept as obviously true.
2. Be skeptical of your first (often semiautomatic) response to a subject: it will often be a cliché (however unintentional). Avoid conventional wisdom unless you introduce a fresh perspective on it.
3. Convert broad categories and generic (fits anything) claims to more specific assertions. Find ways to bring out the complexity of your subject.
4. Submit the wording of your thesis to this grammatical test: if it follows the “abstract noun + is + evaluative adjective” formula (“The economic situation is bad”), substitute a more specific noun and an active verb that will force you to predicate something about a focused subject (“Tax laws benefit the rich”).
5. Routinely examine and question your own key terms and categories rather than simply accepting them. Assume that they mean more than you first thought.
6. Always work to uncover and make explicit the unstated assumptions (premises) underlying your thesis. Don’t treat debatable premises as givens.
7. As a rule, be suspicious of thesis statements that depend on words such as *real*, *accurate*, *believable*, *right*, and *good*. These words usually signal that you are offering personal opinions—what “feels” right to you—as self-evident truths for everybody.
8. One way to assess the adequacy of a thesis statement is to ask yourself where the writer would need to go next to develop his or her idea. If you can’t answer that question, the thesis is still too weak.
9. Qualify your claims; you will avoid the global pronouncements—typical of the dangers of overly categorical thinking—that are too broad to be of much use (or true).