

## Thesis Workshop

### SUBJECT or TOPIC

A subject or a topic is a broad and initial area of inquiry. For example, a topic for an essay on Shakespeare's "Othello" might be:

Discuss race in William Shakespeare's "Othello"

If you write "this paper will discuss the role of race in 'Othello,'" **YOU ARE NOT WRITING A THESIS**. Although this statement introduces your topic, it does not yet propose an **ARGUMENT OR HYPOTHESIS** about that topic.

### THESIS STATEMENT

A thesis **LIMITS** and **FOCUSES** the topic of your paper. It is one sentence that tells your reader what you will be arguing. A thesis statement is **SPECIFIC**, although you may make general statements that lead up to it.

Again, a THESIS offers your argument or hypothesis about a text or issues in a text. Consider the following examples of theses from the topic "discuss race in Shakespeare's 'Othello'":

1. Shakespeare condemns racial stereotyping.
2. Shakespeare condemns racial stereotyping in "Othello."
3. Shakespeare condemns racial stereotyping in "Othello" because it destroys the domestic unit, and thus threatens society itself.

**THESIS 1** is inadequate because it is too general and leaves too many questions: Where does Shakespeare condemn racial typecasting? In what way(s) does he condemn it?

**THESIS 2** is better because it narrows the textual scope of the inquiry (it tells us which play will be discussed), but it still lacks direction: Why does Shakespeare condemn racial typecasting? How does he make it clear that he condemns it?

**THESIS 3** states its argument up front, and focuses on the specifics necessary to support the argument: who?, what?, where?, and why?. The reader will expect to receive proof not only that racial typecasting has destroyed Othello's family, but also that this destruction impacts the wider society of the play. Readers will also have to consider that, as a bi-racial family in a predominantly white society, Othello's family *is* a family, despite contrary messages from the play. The thesis makes both a specific textual claim (and will use quotations as evidence) **AND** an evaluative statement (argument/hypothesis) about the play. In other words, the thesis proposes a specific argument with wider theoretical implications – that is, it offers an interesting way to read and make sense of the play.

Generally, your thesis offers a guide to your paper and gives your reader a focus; it says "this is what I want my paper to say." A good, clearly-articulated thesis saves your reader from having to determine what your argument is at some later point in the paper, or from general inferences, and allows your reader to enjoy/engage with/disagree with the evidence you used to make your argument and with the argument itself -- as *you* lay it out.

Thesis Tests: if your thesis can be supported merely by citation, you do not have a good thesis. A good thesis is driven by **your interpretation** of the citations; 2) your thesis should be debatable, readers should be able to **challenge** your argument, but be **persuaded** by your citations and interpretations of your citations.