

A plan of attack for the keystone of your paper

We know the buildup to the actual research step is getting to be really intense, but you need to learn to pick and refine a topic before figuring out the focal point of your paper: your thesis statement or research question. You just can't afford to waste time wandering aimlessly around the library, or even worse, in your paper. You need to know what your ultimate purpose is and what you need to know and do to get there.

Because we are writing an analytical paper (we are analyzing research done on a particular subject) we need a thesis statement. What is a thesis statement?

Thesis

Some defining features of a thesis (followed by links to tons of examples):

- for most student work, it's a **a one sentence statement** that explicitly outlines the **purpose** or point of your paper. A thesis is to a paper what a topic sentence is to a paragraph
- it should **point toward the development or course of argument** the reader can expect your argument to take, but does not have to specifically include 'three supporting points' as you may have once learned
- because the rest of the paper will support or back up your thesis, a thesis is normally **placed at or near the end of the introductory paragraph.**
- it is **an assertion that a reasonable person could disagree with** if you only gave the thesis and no other evidence. It is not a fact or casual observation; **it must beg to be proved.** And someone should be able to theoretically argue against it (how successfully will depend of course on how persuasive *you* are)
- **it takes a side on a topic** rather than simply announcing that the paper is about a topic (the title and statement of controlling purpose should have already announced your topic). Don't tell a reader *about* something; tell them *what about* something. Answer the questions "how?" or "why?"
- it is sufficiently **narrow and specific** that your supporting points are necessary and sufficient, not arbitrary; paper length and number of supporting points are good guides here
- it argues **one main point** and doesn't squeeze three different theses for three different papers into one sentence
- **most importantly, it passes** The "So What?" Test

The "So What?" Test

Whenever you plan on writing a research paper, there is an extremely important point that you must constantly keep in the forefront of your mind-- even English teachers frequently mention it as something students fail to do time and time again. What is it? To be sure to choose a topic *worth arguing about or exploring*. This means to construct a thesis statement or research question about a problem that is still debated, controversial, up in the air.

So arguing that drinking and driving is dangerous-- while you could find a ton of evidence to support your view --would be pretty worthless nowadays. Who would want to read something they already knew? You wouldn't be persuading them of anything and all your work would be pretty meaningless.

What this means is that during the topic-formulating stage and again now, **always** keep asking "**SO WHAT?**", "**WHO CARES?**" or to paraphrase the famous Canadian journalist Barbara Frum: "Tell me something new about something I care about." That will automatically make your paper significant and interesting both for you to write and the reader to study.

Now let's apply this test a music and grades thesis statement:

If you believe there might be evidence to back that argument up, it certainly seems a worthy thesis considering so many millions of students listen to their stereos while studying at home. Have parents been wrong all this time to tell their kids to shut off all distractions and stay on-task? Does a student's happiness, motivation, or alertness during studying (which now might be directly influenced by radio music) affect the way they approach school, tests, or even education in general?

Congratulations! You've asked and answered So What? and Who Cares? Whether it's a thesis or a question that looks at what music *could* be doing, people would certainly be interested in following your development on this issue. After all, you're not writing a paper trying to convince folks that studying results in better grades. Few would be interested in reading that.
