

Developing a Thesis Statement (SOCY 122)

Once you have spent time exploring the material in question and organizing your observations, start developing the thesis—the central argument of your paper. Sometimes students confuse their topic with their thesis. The assignment **topic** outlines the general scope of your project; the **thesis** focuses your discussion of that topic. A thesis is a statement that takes a position or offers an interpretation of the subject at hand; it is not simply a description or a statement of fact.

The drafting process

Consider the following example from a fictitious “Sociology of Canadian Religion” class.

Topic

Researchers such as Reginald Bibby have noted that while attendance at mainstream Christian churches has declined in recent years, interest in Evangelical Christianity has increased. By considering social factors such as race, age, class or gender, suggest reasons for this shift.

Draft thesis #1

While attendance at mainstream Christian churches has declined in recent years, interest in Evangelical Christianity has increased.

This sentence is not a thesis, but a statement of fact. There is no interpretive position to argue. Try again.

Draft thesis #2

By appealing to contemporary consumer appetites, Evangelical Christian churches have repackaged their faith and, as a result, increased their numbers.

This is better. The author has looked at the data and offered an interpretation of it. His/her discussion will likely focus on the “class” and “age” aspects of the assignment topic. Another essay might emphasize other factors such as ethnicity (arguing that these churches appeal primarily to new immigrants, or, perhaps, that they appeal primarily to Canadians from Anglo-European backgrounds) or gender (arguing, perhaps, that these churches represent a return to a patriarchal view or that they do the opposite and affirm gender collaboration.) As long as the points are lucid and convincingly argued, any of these approaches would be fair game as a thesis.

What/How/Why

One way to develop a concise thesis is to organize your thoughts around a **What/How/Why** strategy. This method can help you move from a descriptive position to an interpretive one. Sometimes using a chart can help you map out your ideas. Consider the following example:

<p>WHAT</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the matter at hand • the topic or incident to be examined 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Evangelical Christians have increased numbers by appealing to consumer appetites
<p>HOW</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the means by which the topic will be examined • examples, themes, key images, etc. (i.e., the major discussion points of your essay) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • changes in style: bands, visuals, lifestyle programming, multi-purpose buildings • portability and consumer culture: material goods, books, CDs, video for sale, big conferences • who's going to these churches? young families and affluent people; non-nuclear families, lower classes, and people who are LGBTQ seem excluded
<p>WHY</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • interpretation of the events/topic/etc. • significance of examining the topic from the angle you have chosen • conclusions to be drawn (i.e., the “so what” of your argument) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Churches reflect middle-class, suburban values; numbers are up, but those who aren't middle class don't fit

So, with these factors in mind, a more fully developed thesis statement might look like this:

By appealing to consumer appetites, Evangelical churches have repackaged their faith in a way that

reflects and promotes middle-class, suburban values. While this shift has helped to increase numbers, it has also excluded those who fall outside these implicit social and economic parameters.

When using a **what/how/why** breakdown, the heart of the thesis usually rests in the **why** statement. A thesis that only addresses **what** and **how** usually ends up being merely descriptive. The **why** component foregrounds your interpretation of the data presented, which is the core of your paper. What your reader is most interested in is your take on the information—your interpretation or approach to the matter at hand—not just a summary of the details involved. A thesis statement that answers **what/how/why** in 1-2 sentences gives your paper a precise focus. It shows your reader that you know where you're going and why it is worthwhile to get there.