

DEVELOPING A THESIS STATEMENT

You have your assignment and you've chosen your topic. Once you've spent some time exploring the material you want to use and organizing your observations, you will need to start developing your thesis – the central argument of your paper.

Don't confuse your topic with your thesis. The assignment *topic* outlines the general scope of your project. Your *thesis* focuses your discussion of that topic. A thesis is a statement that takes a position or offers an interpretation of the subject. It is not simply a description or a statement of fact.

For example, "*The artists in the Group of Seven focused on the Canadian landscape*" is not a thesis but a statement of fact. There is no position to argue. Try again.

"Through their use of vibrant colour and bold shapes, the Group of Seven revitalized the art of landscape painting in Canada."

This is better. The statement not only refers to certain facts but also interprets them. The writer implies that the visual style of these paintings is the source of their influence. Another essay might view the influence of these artists from a completely different angle, arguing that the ethnicity and gender of the artists – all white males of European descent – had more to do with the Group of Seven's influence than did any of their innovations in style. As long as the points are clear and convincingly argued, either of these approaches would be fair game as a thesis.

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.

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| WHAT | the topic or incident to be examined | Influence of the Group of Seven on Canadian art and culture |
| HOW | the means by which the topic will be examined – examples, themes, key images, etc., i.e., the major discussion points of your essay | Innovations in style (colour, shape); Influence on other artists; Prevalence of Group of Seven images in Canadian iconography, national symbols, etc. |
| WHY | your interpretation of the events, topic, etc.; the significance of examining the topic from the angle you have chosen; conclusions to be drawn (i.e., the “SO WHAT?” of your argument) | The Group of Seven’s paintings redefined Canada’s sense of national identity. |

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

“Through their innovative use of colour and shape, the Group of Seven not only revitalized the art of landscape painting but also redefined the Canadian vision of both the landscape and the nation itself.”

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 one to two 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.