The Thesis:
Some Guidelines
The Thesis: Some Guidelines

• 1. What a thesis should do
• 2. How to craft a thesis
• 3. How to test your thesis
1. What a thesis should do
1. A good thesis

A. Articulates the main idea of the essay, answering the question asked of you.
1. A good thesis

   B. Is an argument.
1. A good thesis

B. Is an argument.

- Expresses your stance or interpretation, not just a fact.
1. A good thesis

B. Is an argument.

- Expresses your stance or interpretation, not just a fact.
- Makes a claim that others might challenge.
1. A good thesis

B. Is an argument.

Poor: Pollution is bad for the environment.
1. A good thesis

B. Is an argument.

Poor: Pollution is bad for the environment.
Better: At least twenty-five percent of the federal budget should be spent on limiting pollution.
1. A good thesis

B. Is an argument.

Poor: Pollution is bad for the environment.
Better: At least twenty-five percent of the federal budget should be spent on limiting pollution.

The first states a fact that no one would argue with. The second makes a specific (if far-fetched) argument.
1. A good thesis

B. Is an argument.

Poor: This essay will argue that at least twenty-five percent of the federal budget should be spent on limiting pollution.
1. A good thesis

B. Is an argument.

Poor: This essay will argue that at least twenty-five percent of the federal budget should be spent on limiting pollution.

Rather than saying, “This essay will argue that twenty-five percent should be spent,” cut out the fat:

“Twenty-five percent should be spent”

Then my response might be not “Why does your essay argue that?” but “Why is that so?”
1. A good thesis

C. Is specific.
1. A good thesis

C. Is specific.

• Includes key points to answer “How?” and “Why?”
1. A good thesis

C. Is specific.

• Includes key points to answer “How?” and “Why?”
• Is a road map for the essay: suggests its structure.
1. A good thesis

C. Is specific.

- Includes key points to answer “How?” and “Why?”
- Is a road map for the essay: suggests its structure.
2. How to craft a Thesis

We’ll look at two approaches.

At least twenty-five percent of the federal budget should be spent on limiting pollution.
At least twenty-five percent of the federal budget should be spent on limiting pollution. How?
At least twenty-five percent of the federal budget should be spent on limiting pollution. How?

At least twenty-five percent of the federal budget should be spent on limiting pollution, by subsidizing alternative energy research and building a national system of high-speed rail.
At least twenty-five percent of the federal budget should be spent on limiting pollution. **How?**

At least twenty-five percent of the federal budget should be spent on limiting pollution, **by subsidizing alternative energy research and building a national system of high-speed rail.** **Why?**
At least twenty-five percent of the federal budget should be spent on limiting pollution. **How?**

At least twenty-five percent of the federal budget should be spent on limiting pollution, **by subsidizing alternative energy research and building a national system of high-speed rail.** **Why?**

**Because the long-term costs of pollution pose a significant burden to the federal government,** at least twenty-five percent of its budget should be spent on limiting pollution, **by subsidizing alternative energy research and building a national system of high-speed rail.** (Addresses How and Why, and is therefore more specific)
The 2nd approach to making your thesis more focused and specific:

**The 5-Step Approach**

1. Broad Topic: Start with a *general subject* or idea to explore.
2. Narrowed Topic: **Focus** your angle; **zoom in** on one aspect of the subject.
3. Opinion/Interpretation: Make an *original argument* about the topic.
4. Reason: **Answer “why”** this argument is so.
5. Points: **Name key effects or instances** of your analysis that you will explore in more detail in the essay.
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We’ll take a sample thesis through it….
• Broad topic:
• **Broad topic:** Climate change  What specific area of climate change?
• **Broad topic:** Climate change What specific area of climate change?
• **Narrowed topic:**
• **Broad topic:** Climate change What specific area of climate change?
• **Narrowed topic:** The effects of climate change
• **Broad topic:** Climate change *What specific area of climate change?*
• **Narrowed topic:** The effects of climate change *What about them?*
• **Broad topic**: Climate change

  What specific area of climate change?

• **Narrowed topic**: The effects of climate change

  What about them?

• **Opinion/Interpretation**: 
• Broad topic: Climate change What specific area of climate change?
• Narrowed topic: The effects of climate change What about them?
• Opinion/Interpretation: must be understood as a humanitarian as well as an environmental threat
• **Broad topic:** Climate change  *What specific area of climate change?*

• **Narrowed topic:** The effects of climate change  *What about them?*

• **Opinion/Interpretation:** must be understood as a humanitarian as well as an environmental threat  *Why?*
• **Broad topic:** Climate change **What specific area of climate change?**
• **Narrowed topic:** The effects of climate change **What about them?**
• **Opinion/Interpretation:** must be understood as a humanitarian as well as an environmental threat **Why?**
• **Reason:**
• Broad topic: Climate change What specific area of climate change?
• Narrowed topic: The effects of climate change What about them?
• Opinion/Interpretation: must be understood as a humanitarian as well as an environmental threat Why?
• Reason: because they will cause extreme disturbances
• **Broad topic:** Climate change What specific area of climate change?
• **Narrowed topic:** The effects of climate change What about them?
• **Opinion/Interpretation:** must be understood as a humanitarian as well as an environmental threat Why?
• **Reason:** because they will cause extreme disturbances To what?
• Broad topic: Climate change What specific area of climate change?
• Narrowed topic: The effects of climate change What about them?
• Opinion/Interpretation: must be understood as a humanitarian as well as an environmental threat Why?
• Reason: because they will cause extreme disturbances To what?
• Points:
Broad topic: Climate change What specific area of climate change?
Narrowed topic: The effects of climate change What about them?
Opinion/Interpretation: must be understood as a humanitarian as well as an environmental threat Why?
Reason: because they will cause extreme disturbances To what?
Points: to human habitats, water supplies, and arable land.
• **Broad topic:** Climate change What specific area of climate change?
• **Narrowed topic:** The effects of climate change What about them?
• **Opinion/Interpretation:** must be understood as a humanitarian as well as an environmental threat Why?
• **Reason:** because they will cause extreme disturbances To what?
• **Points:** to human habitats, water supplies, and arable land.

Now put it all together:
The effects of climate must be understood as a humanitarian as well as an environmental threat, because they will cause extreme disturbances to human habitats, water supplies, and arable land.
The effects of climate must be understood as a humanitarian as well as an environmental threat, because they will cause extreme disturbances to human habitats, water supplies, and arable land.

Note that the bolded main points of the thesis indicate the blueprint of the essay to follow.
The effects of climate must be understood as a humanitarian as well as an environmental threat, because they will cause extreme disturbances to human habitats, water supplies, and arable land.

Note that the bolded main points of the thesis indicate the blueprint of the essay to follow…. 
I. Introduction

II. Disturbances to human habitats
   i. Example/support
   ii. Example/support

III. Disturbances to water supplies
   i. Example/support
   ii. Example/support

IV. Disturbances to arable land
   i. Example/support
   ii. Example/support

V. Conclusion

The body corresponds with the points and sequence of the thesis.
Let’s look at another example using the 5-Step Approach:
• **Broad topic:** Climate change
• **Narrowed topic:** Federal efforts to mitigate climate change
• Broad topic: Climate change
• Narrowed topic: Federal efforts to mitigate climate change
• Opinion/Stance/Interpretation: should focus on a carbon tax rather than cap-and-trade policy
• **Broad topic:** Climate change
• **Narrowed topic:** Federal efforts to mitigate climate change
• **Opinion/Stance/Interpretation:** should focus on a carbon tax rather than cap-and-trade policy
• **Reason:** because it provides greater benefits to the taxpayer
• **Broad topic:** Climate change
• **Narrowed topic:** Federal efforts to mitigate climate change
• **Opinion/Stance/Interpretation:** should focus on a carbon tax rather than cap-and-trade policy
• **Reason:** because it provides greater benefits to the taxpayer
• **Points:** by its predictability, transparency, and simplicity.
Federal efforts to mitigate climate change should focus on a carbon tax rather than cap-and-trade policy, because it provides greater benefits to the taxpayer by its predictability, transparency, and simplicity.
Federal efforts to mitigate climate change should focus on a carbon tax rather than cap-and-trade policy, because it provides greater benefits to the taxpayer by its predictability, transparency, and simplicity.

Since this thesis sets up both a comparison (of carbon tax vs. cap-and-trade) and three points of comparison, we have a good sense of the essay’s structure:
I. Predictability
   A. Cap-and-trade policy
   B. Carbon tax

II. Transparency
   A. Cap-and-trade policy
   B. Carbon Tax

III. Simplicity
   A. Cap-and-trade policy
   B. Carbon Tax

The body corresponds with the points and sequence of the thesis.
3. How to test your thesis
Ask:

• Have I fully answered the question?
• Have I stated a position that others might challenge or oppose?
• Is it specific enough?
• Do its points accurately suggest the shape and content of the essay?
• Does it pass the “How and Why” and/or the 5-Step tests?
• Does it answer “So what?” – that is, does it give a sense of why this argument matters?
As you work on your essay, keep in mind:

• Honing a thesis and writing an essay are **recursive** processes – **reassessing and revising are part of the job.**

• **It would be hard to create a perfect thesis without first writing any of the essay.** Writing itself helps us know what we want to say. We can’t craft a thesis until we know what we want to say.

• **It’s normal (and good!) for your thesis to change as you write the essay, and/or for your essay to change as you hone the thesis.**
Unsure about your thesis?

Bring your essay to the Learning Assistance Center!

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