

Chapter 11

Making a Thesis Evolve

THIS CHAPTER IS AT THE HEART of what we have to say about essay writing, especially about the function of thesis statements. The chapter argues that even in a final draft a thesis develops through successive complications; it doesn't remain static, as people tend to believe. Even in cases such as the report format of the natural and social sciences, where the thesis itself cannot change, there is still development between the beginning of the paper and the end. The thesis, usually called a hypothesis, is tested in various ways in order to evaluate its adequacy.

Formulating a claim, seeking conflicting evidence, and then using these conflicts to revise the claim is a primary movement of mind in analytical writing. Here's the mantra: *the complications you encounter are an opportunity to make your thesis evolve*, not a problem. An evolving thesis is one that responds more fully and accurately to evidence.

This chapter contains one heuristic, Six Steps for Making a Thesis Evolve Through Successive Complications. Here is a skeletal version of this process, which the chapter will demonstrate and define in more detail.

SIX STEPS FOR MAKING A THESIS EVOLVE THROUGH SUCCESSIVE COMPLICATIONS

1. Formulate an idea about your subject, a working thesis.
2. See how far you can make this thesis go in accounting for confirming evidence.
3. Locate evidence that is not adequately accounted for by the thesis.
4. Make explicit the apparent mismatch between the thesis and selected evidence, asking and answering "so what?"
5. Reshape your claim to accommodate the evidence that hasn't fit.
6. Repeat steps 2, 3, 4, and 5 several times.

Your ability to discover ideas and improve on them in revision, as we've argued in the preceding chapters, depends largely on your attitude toward evidence—on your ability to use it as a means of testing and developing your ideas rather than just (statically) confirming and reasserting them.

MOVING FROM IDEA TO THESIS STATEMENT: WHAT A GOOD THESIS LOOKS LIKE

Considerable misunderstanding exists about thesis statements among students—and among many teachers. We have chosen to use the term “thesis” because, by and large, it is the most common term across the academic disciplines for what might otherwise be called a “controlling idea” or “primary claim” or “hypothesis.” The term has a long history, going back to classical rhetoric wherein a thesis involved taking a position on some subject. The term “thesis” named general questions with wide applications. The term “hypothesis” was used “to name a specific question that involved actual persons, places, or events” (Crowley 57). (For an excellent discussion of the history of these terms, see Sharon Crowley and Debra Hawhee, *Ancient Rhetorics for Contemporary Students*.)

This idea of “taking a position,” as in an argument, is what some faculty members dislike about the term, mistaking it perhaps for an invitation to writers to express their views on a subject rather than closely examining it. For every faculty member who wishes student writers to organize their thinking around a clearly-defined central claim (thesis), other faculty members argue that thesis-driven writing and reflective writing differ in methods and goals.

In the meantime, we will continue to use the term thesis, though not in the way it is often described in writing textbooks, where it is presented as a static idea that a writer sets out to prove. Our use of the term is probably closer to the idea of a “hypothesis,” which has come to mean a theory to be tested.

Arriving at Thesis Statements: When and Where

The most disabling misunderstanding for students is that a writer needs to have a thesis before he or she begins writing. Good thesis statements are the product of writing, not its precursor. Worrying about having a thesis statement too early in the writing process will just about guarantee papers that support overly general and often obvious ideas. Arriving prematurely at claims also blinds writers to complicating evidence (evidence that runs counter to the thesis) and so deprives them of their best opportunities to arrive at better ideas.

Another disabling assumption is that the thesis of a paper must always appear at or near the end of the first paragraph, preferably in the form of a single-sentence claim. The fact is that the governing idea of most analytical writing is too complex to be asserted as a single-sentence claim that could be understood at the beginning of the paper. *Nevertheless*, it is true that a writer has not moved from the exploratory writing phase to the writing of a paper until he or she has discovered an idea around which his or her thinking can cohere. Without a governing idea to hold onto, readers will not understand why you are telling them what you are telling them. In order for a paper to make sense to readers, a thesis, or, in the case of inductively organized papers, a thesis “trail” (some sense of the issues and questions that are generating the paper’s forward momentum) must be evident. (See *The Shaping Force of Common Thought Patterns: Deduction and Induction* in Chapter 15.)

The best way to learn about thesis statements is to look for them in published writing. You will find that the single-sentence thesis statement as prescribed in writing textbooks is a rather rare specimen. It is most common in argument, wherein a writer has a proposition that he or she wants readers to either adopt or dismiss. In analytical writing, the thesis is more likely to become evident in phases, guided by some kind of opening claim sufficient to get the paper started. This claim is commonly known as the **working thesis**. Sometimes as much as the first third of a paper will explore an idea that the rest of the paper will subsequently replace with a different, though not necessarily opposing perspective. If you look closely, however, you will see the trail that lets readers anticipate a shift from one possible way of seeing things to another.

Strong versus Weak Thesis Statements

A thesis is an idea. It is a thought that you have arrived at about your evidence, rather than something you can expect to find, ready-made, in whatever you are studying. A strong thesis is a theory about the meaning and significance of your evidence that would not have been immediately obvious to your readers. A weak thesis either makes no claim or makes a claim that doesn’t need proving, such as a statement of fact or an opinion with which virtually all of your readers would most likely agree before reading your essay (for example, “exercise is good for you”).

Analytical writing begins with something puzzling that the writer wishes to better understand. Strong thesis statements enable exploration. Weak thesis statements disable exploration by closing things down way too tightly at the outset.

Here are two characteristics that an idea needs to possess in order to work as a thesis.

- the thesis of an analytical paper is an idea about what some feature or features of your subject *means*
- a thesis should be an idea in need of argument; that is, it should not be a statement of fact or an idea with which most readers would already agree.

Finding the Tension in Good Thesis Statements

In the Try This on the next page are six examples of good thesis statements, that is, good translations of ideas into forms that could direct the development of an essay. The first thing you should notice about all of these thesis statements is the presence of tension—the pressure of one idea against another idea, of one potentially viable way of seeing things against another viable, but finally less satisfactory way of seeing things. Good ideas usually take place with the aid of some kind of back pressure, by which we mean that the idea takes shape by pushing against (so to speak) another way of seeing things. This is not the same as setting out to overturn and completely refute one idea in favor of another (although thesis statements sometimes work in this way too). More often what happens is that the thesis statement’s primary idea emerges as some kind of clarification or reworking of another idea. The forward momentum of the thesis comes from playing the newer idea off of the older one.

Try This 11.1: Spotting the Tension in Good Thesis Statements

Look at the thesis statements below, all of which were taken from published analytical essays. Find the tension in each, or the defining pressure of one idea against another possibility. In the first thesis sentence, for example, the primary idea is that the new advertising campaign for Docker trousers is radical. The back pressure against which this idea takes shape is that this new campaign may not seem radical. The writer will demonstrate the truth of both of these claims, rather than overturning one and then championing the other. The same can be said of the parts of the second thesis statement. The primary idea, recognizable by the syntax of the second sentence, is that cosmetic surgery will make life worse for everyone. The back pressure against which this idea will take shape is the claim that cosmetic surgery has psychological benefits; it makes individual people happier.

Notice that the thesis statement does not simply say: "Cosmetic surgery is bad." The writer's job will be to demonstrate that the potential harm of cosmetic surgery outweighs the benefits, but the benefits won't be just summarily dismissed. Both of the two ideas are to some extent true. Neither idea, in other words, is a **straw man**—the somewhat deceptive argumentative practice of setting up a dummy position solely because it is easy to knock down. A straw man does not strengthen a thesis statement because it fails to provide genuine back pressure.

- 1) It may not seem like it, but "Nice Pants" is as radical a campaign as the original Docker series.
- 2) If opponents of cosmetic surgery are too quick to dismiss those who claim great psychological benefits, protesters are far too willing to dismiss those who raise concerns. Cosmetic surgery might make individual people happier, but in the aggregate it makes life worse for everyone.
- 3) The history of thought in the modern era of history of thinking about the self may be an exaggeration, but the consequences of this vision of a self set apart have surely been felt in every field of inquiry.
- 4) We may join with the modern builders in justifying the violence of means—the sculptor's hammer and chisel—by appealing to ends that serve the greater good. Yet too often modern planners and engineers would justify the creative destruction of habitat as necessary for doubtful utopias.
- 5) The derogation of middlebrow, in short, has gone much too far. It's time to bring middlebrow out of its cultural closet, to hail its emollient properties, to trumpet its mending virtues. For middlebrow not only entertains, it educates—pleasurably training us to appreciate high art.
- 6) There is a connection between the idea of place and the reality of cellular telephones. It is not encouraging. Places are unique—or at least we like to believe they are—and we strive to experience them as a kind of engagement with particulars. Cell phones are precisely the opposite.

If you have been taught to write in 5-paragraph form in school, you will initially have some difficulty writing thesis statements of the sort you have just seen. This is because the "thesis statement plus three supporting paragraphs" format of 5-paragraph form invites listing rather than the articulation of ideas. The typical three-part thesis of 5-paragraph form offers a short list of broadly stated topics (rather than well-defined claims about the topics) and then offers examples of each of these in the body paragraphs.

There is nothing wrong with partitioning the development of a subject into manageable parts, but there is a lot wrong with a thesis that makes no claim or an overly general and obvious claim such as "Television causes adolescents to become violent, lazy, and ill-read." All three parts of this general claim may be true, but nothing much of substance can be said about them in a short paper that is trying to cover all three. And notice the lack of tension in this sample thesis statement. Try writing a better thesis statement—one that has tension—about the impact of some aspect of television on teenagers.

A Note on the Syntax of Good Thesis Statements

Before we move on to concentrated applications of the procedure for making a thesis evolve, take a look at the shape of imprecise thesis statements:

Environmentalism prevents economic growth.

Tax laws benefit the wealthy.

The economic situation today is bad.

Women in contemporary films are more sensitive than men.

All four are simple, declarative sentences that offer very broad assertions. They are both grammatically and conceptually simple. More than that, they're *slack*—especially the first three, in which the primary claim stands alone, not in relation to anything else.

The very *shape* of these weak thesis statements is a warning sign. Most effective working theses, though they may begin more simply, achieve both grammatical and conceptual complexity as they evolve. Such theses contain tension in their syntax, the balance of this against that. Thus, they begin with "although" or incorporate "however" or use an "appears to be about *x* but is actually about *y*" kind of formulation. (See "Appears to be about *X*..." in Chapter 4.)

Here, by contrast, are three possible versions of the fourth weak thesis above:

Although women more readily cry in contemporary films, the men, by not crying, seem to win the audience's favor.

The complications that fuel the plots in today's romantic comedies arise because women and men express their sensitivity so differently; the resolutions, however, rarely require the men to capitulate.

A spate of recent films has witnessed the emergence of the new "womanly" man as hero, and not surprisingly, his tender qualities seem to be the reason he attracts the female love interest.

THE RECIPROCAL RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THESIS AND EVIDENCE: THE THESIS AS LENS

What we have said so far about the thesis does not mean that all repetition of ideas in an essay is bad or that a writer's concluding paragraph should have no reference to the way the paper began. One function of the thesis is to provide the connective tissue, so to speak, that holds together a paper's three main parts—beginning, middle, and end. Periodic reminders of your paper's thesis, its unifying idea, are essential for keeping both you and your readers on track.

As we've also argued, though, developing an idea requires more than repetition. It is in light of this fact that the analogy of thesis to connective tissue proves inadequate. A better way of envisioning how a thesis operates is to think of it as a camera lens. This analogy more accurately describes the relationship between the thesis and the subject it seeks to explain. While the lens affects how we see the subject (what evidence we select, what questions we ask about that evidence), the subject we are looking at also affects how we adjust the lens.

Here is the principle that the camera lens analogy allows us to see: the relationship between thesis and subject is *reciprocal*. In good analytical writing, especially in the early, investigatory stages of writing and thinking, the thesis not only directs the writer's way of looking at evidence; the analysis of evidence should also direct and redirect (bring about revision of) the thesis. Even in a final draft, writers are usually fine-tuning their governing idea in response to their analysis of evidence. (See Figure 11.1.)

The enemy of good analytical writing is the fuzzy lens—imprecisely worded thesis statements. Very broad thesis statements, those that are made up of imprecise (fuzzy) terms, make bad lenses. They blur everything together and muddy important distinctions. If your lens is insufficiently focused, you are not likely to see much in your evidence. If you say, for example, that the economic situation today is bad, you will at least have some sense of direction, but the imprecise terms "bad" and "economic situation" don't provide you with a focus clear enough to distinguish significant detail in your evidence. Without significant detail to analyze, you can't develop your thesis, either by showing readers what the thesis is good for (what it allows us to understand and explain) or by clarifying its terms.

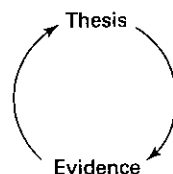


FIGURE 11.1

The Reciprocal Relationship Between Thesis and Evidence. Like a lens, the thesis affects the way a writer sees evidence. Evidence should also require the writer to readjust the lens.

A writer's thesis is usually fuzzier in a paper's opening than it is in the conclusion. As we argued in our critique of five-paragraph form in Chapter 10, a paper ending with a claim worded almost exactly as it was in the beginning has not made its thesis adequately responsive to evidence. The body of the paper should not only substantiate the thesis by demonstrating its value in selecting and explaining evidence, but also bring the opening version of the thesis into better focus.

Making a Thesis Evolve: A Brief Example

More often than not, when inexperienced writers face a situation in which evidence seems to be unclear or contradictory, they tend to make one of two unproductive moves: they either ignore the conflicting evidence, or they abandon the problem altogether and look for something more clear-cut to write about. Faced with evidence that complicates your thesis, the one thing not to do is run away.

The savvy writer will actively seek out complicating evidence, taking advantage of chances to bring out complications in order to make the thesis more fully responsive to evidence. Let's revisit a sample thesis from the discussion of uncovering assumptions in Chapter 4, "tax laws benefit the wealthy." If you were to seek out data that would complicate this overstated claim, you would soon encounter evidence that would press you to make some distinctions that the initial formulation of this claim leaves obscure. You would need, for example, to distinguish different sources of wealth and then to determine whether all or just some wealthy taxpayers are benefited by tax laws.

Do people whose wealth comes primarily from investments benefit less (or more) than those whose wealth comes from high wages? Evidence might also lead you to consider whether tax laws, by benefiting the wealthy, also benefit other people indirectly. Both of these considerations would necessitate some reformulation of the thesis. By the end of the paper, the claim that tax laws benefit the wealthy would have evolved into a more carefully defined and qualified statement that would reflect the thinking you have done in your analysis of evidence. This, by and large, is what good concluding paragraphs do—they reflect back on and reformulate your paper's initial position in light of the thinking you have done about it. (See Figure 11.2.)

But, you might ask, isn't this reformulating of the thesis something a writer does before he or she writes the essay? Certainly some of it is accomplished in the early exploratory writing and note-taking stage. But your finished paper will necessarily do

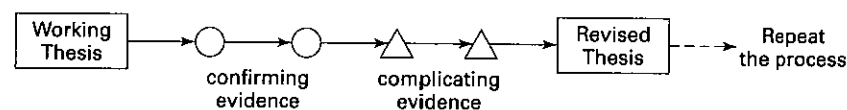


FIGURE 11.2

A strong thesis evolves as it confronts and assimilates evidence; the evolved thesis may expand or restrict the original claim. The process may need to be repeated a number of times.

more than list conclusions. Your revision process will have weeded out various false starts and dead ends that you may have wandered into on the way to your finished ideas, but the main routes of your movement from a tentative idea to a refined and substantiated theory should remain visible for readers to follow. To an extent, all good writing reenacts the chains of thought that led you to your conclusions.

Try This 11.2: Qualifying Overstated Claims

Making a thesis evolve is to make that thesis more accurate. To do so is almost always to qualify (limit) the claim. Using the model of inquiry in the treatment of the example "Tax laws benefit the wealthy," seek out complications in one of the overstated claims listed below. These complications should include conflicting evidence (which you should specify) and questions about the meaning or appropriateness of key terms. Illustrate a few of these complications, and then reformulate the claim in language that is more carefully qualified and accurate.

Welfare encourages recipients not to work.

Religious people are more moral than those who are not.

Herbal remedies are better than pharmaceutical ones.

The book is always better than the film.

Women are more sensitive than men.

We learn from the lessons of history.

The Evolving Thesis as Hypothesis and Conclusion in the Natural and Social Sciences

A thesis functions differently depending on the academic discipline—whether it must be stated in full at the outset, for example, and what happens to it between the beginning of the paper and the end. The differences appear largest as you move back and forth between courses in the humanities and courses in the natural and certain of the social sciences.

The natural and social sciences generally use a pair of terms, *hypothesis* and *conclusion*, for the single term *thesis*. Because writing in the sciences is patterned according to the scientific method, writers in disciplines such as biology and psychology must report how the original thesis (hypothesis) was tested against empirical evidence and then conclude on this basis whether or not the hypothesis was confirmed.

The gap between this way of thinking about the thesis and the concept of an evolving thesis is not as large as it may seem. The scientific method is in sync with one of the chapter's main points—that something must happen to the thesis between the introduction and the conclusion—so that the conclusion does more than just restate what had already been claimed in the beginning.

Analogously, in a scientific paper, the hypothesis is tested against evidence, the results of which allow the writer to draw conclusions about the hypothesis's validity. Although the hypothesis does not change (or evolve), the testing of it and subsequent interpretation of those results produce commentary on and, often, qualifications of the paper's central claim.

In the natural and social sciences, successive reformulations of the thesis are less likely to be recorded and may not even be expressly articulated. But, as in all disciplines, the primary analytical activity in the sciences is to repeatedly reconsider the assumptions on which a conclusion is based. (See Chapter 15, *Forms and Formats Across the Curriculum*.)

The Hypothesis in the Natural and Social Sciences: Four Professors Speak

The following Voices from *Across the Curriculum* explain how a hypothesis functions in writing in their disciplines. Notice that in each case, although the hypothesis itself does not change, something does happen to it between introduction and conclusion.

Voices from Across the Curriculum

- If the empirical evidence doesn't confirm your hypothesis, you rethink your hypothesis, but it's a complex issue. Researchers whose hypotheses are not confirmed often question their *method* ("if I had more subjects," or "a better manipulation of the experimental group," or "a better test of intelligence," etc.) as much as their hypothesis. And that's often legitimate. Part of the challenge of psychological research is its reliance on a long array of assumptions. Failure to confirm a hypothesis could mean a problem in any of that long array of assumptions. So failure to confirm your hypothesis is often difficult to interpret.
—Alan Tjeltveit, Professor of Psychology
- The thesis in experimental psychology papers is the statement of the hypothesis. It is always carefully and explicitly stated in the last few sentences of the introduction. The hypothesis is usually a deductive statement such as: if color does influence mood, then an ambiguous picture printed on different colors of paper should be interpreted differently, depending on the color of the paper. Specifically, based on the results of Jones (1997), the pink paper should cause participants to perceive the picture as a more calm and restful image, and the green paper should cause the picture to be interpreted as a more anxious image.
—Laura Edelman, Professor of Psychology
- The thesis is usually presented in the abstract and then again at the end of the introduction. Probably the most frequent writing error is not providing a thesis at all. Sometimes this is because the student doesn't *have* a thesis; other times, it is because the student wants to maintain a sense of mystery about the paper, as if driving toward a dramatic conclusion. This actually makes it harder to read. The best papers are clear and up front about what their point is, then use evidence and argument to support and evaluate the thesis. I encourage students to have a sentence immediately following their discussion of the background on the

subject that can be as explicit as: "In this paper, I will argue that while research on toxic effects of methyl bromide provides troubling evidence for severe physiological effects, conclusive proof of a significant environmental hazard is lacking at this time."

I try to avoid the use of the term "hypothesis." I think it gives the false sense that scientists always start with an idea about how something works. Frequently, that is not the case. Some of the best science has actually come from observation. Darwin's work on finches is a classic example. His ideas about adaptation probably derived from the observation.

—Bruce Wightman, Professor of Biology

- Economists do make pretense to follow scientific methodology. Thus, we are careful not to mix hypothesis and conclusion. I think it's important to distinguish between what is conjectured, the working hypothesis, and what ultimately emerges as a result of an examination of the evidence. Conclusions come only after some test has been passed.

—James Marshall, Professor of Economics

So, in the natural and social sciences, successive reformulations of the thesis are less likely to be recorded and may not even be expressly articulated. But, as in all disciplines, the primary analytical activity in the sciences is to repeatedly reconsider the assumptions on which a conclusion is based.

SIX STEPS FOR MAKING A THESIS EVOLVE

As an overarching guideline, *acknowledge the questions that each new formulation of the thesis prompts you to ask*. The thesis develops through successive complications. Allowing your thesis to run up against potentially conflicting evidence ("but what about this?") enables you to build on your initial idea, extending the range of evidence it can accurately account for by clarifying and qualifying its key terms.

1. Formulate an idea about your subject. This working thesis should be some claim about the meaning of your evidence that is good enough to get you started.
2. See how far you can make this thesis go in accounting for evidence. Use the thesis to explain as much of your evidence as it reasonably can. Try it on.
3. Locate evidence that is not adequately accounted for by the thesis. Actively search for such evidence because the initial version of the thesis will incline you to see only what fits and not to notice the evidence that doesn't fit.
4. Make explicit the apparent mismatch between the thesis and selected evidence. Explain how and why some pieces of evidence do not fit the thesis.
5. Reshape your claim to accommodate the evidence that hasn't fit. This will mean rewording your thesis to resolve or explain apparent contradictions.
6. Repeat steps two, three, four, and five several times, until you are satisfied that the thesis statement accounts for your evidence as fully and accurately as possible.

EVOLVING A THESIS IN AN EXPLORATORY DRAFT: THE EXAMPLE OF LAS MENINAS

The example is a student writer's exploratory draft on a painting called *Las Meninas* (Spanish for "the ladies-in-waiting") by the seventeenth-century painter Diego Velázquez. The method of analysis used here will, however, work with anything, print or non-print.

Look at the painting in Figure 11.3, and then read the student's draft. As you read, you will notice that much of the essay consists of list-like description, which leaves it somewhat unfocused. But careful description is a necessary stage in moving toward interpretations of evidence, especially in an exploratory draft where the writer is not yet committed to any single position. Notice how the writer's word choice in her



FIGURE 11.3
Las Meninas by Diego Velázquez, 1656 Approximately 10'5" x 9'. Museo del Prado, Madrid.

descriptions prompts various kinds of interpretive leaps. We have added in brackets our observations about how the writer's thinking is proceeding, and we have used underlining to track her various attempts at formulating a thesis.

Velázquez's Intentions in *Las Meninas*

- [1] Velázquez has been noted as being one of the best Spanish artists of all time. It seems that as Velázquez got older, his paintings became better. Toward the end of his life, he painted his masterpiece, *Las Meninas*. Out of all his works, *Las Meninas* is the only known self-portrait of Velázquez. There is much to be said about *Las Meninas*. The painting is very complex, but some of the intentions that Velázquez had in painting *Las Meninas* are very clear. [The writer opens with background information and a broad working thesis (underlined).]
- [2] First, we must look at the painting as a whole. The question that must be answered is, Who is in the painting? The people are all members of the Royal Court of the Spanish monarch Philip IV. In the center is the king's daughter, who eventually became Empress of Spain. Around her are her *meninas* or ladies-in-waiting. These *meninas* are all daughters of influential men. To the right of the *meninas* are dwarfs who are servants, and the family dog who looks fierce but is easily tamed by the foot of the little dwarf. The more unique people in the painting are Velázquez himself, who stands to the left in front of a large canvas; the king and queen, whose faces are captured in the obscure mirror; the man in the doorway; and the nun and man behind the *meninas*. To analyze this painting further, the relationship between characters must be understood. [The writer describes the evidence and arrives at an operating assumption—focusing on the relationship among characters.]
- [3] Where is this scene occurring? Most likely it is in the palace. But why is there no visible furniture? Is it because Velázquez didn't want the viewers to become distracted from his true intentions? I believe it is to show that this is not just a painting of an actual event. This is an event out of his imagination. [The writer begins pushing observations to tentative conclusions by asking *So what?*]
- [4] Now, let us become better acquainted with the characters. The child in the center is the most visible. All the light is shining on her. Maybe Velázquez is suggesting that she is the next light for Spain and that even God has approved her by shining all the available light on her. Back in those days there was a belief in the divine right of kings, so this just might be what Velázquez is saying. [The writer starts ranking evidence for importance and continues to ask,

So what?; she arrives at a possible interpretation of the painter's intention.]

- [5] The next people of interest are the ones behind the *meninas*. The woman in the habit might be a nun and the man a priest.
- [6] The king and queen are the next group of interesting people. They are in the mirror, which is to suggest they are present, but they are not as visible as they might be. Velázquez suggests that they are not always at the center where everyone would expect them to be. [The writer continues using Notice and Focus plus asking *So what?*; the writer has begun tackling evidence that might conflict with her first interpretation.]
- [7] The last person and the most interesting is Velázquez. He dominates the painting along with the little girl. He takes up the whole left side along with his gigantic easel. But what is he painting? As I previously said, he might be painting the king and queen. But I also think he could be pretending to paint us, the viewers. The easel really gives this portrait an air of mystery because Velázquez knows that we, the viewers, want to know what he is painting. [The writer starts doing 10 on 1 with her selection of the most significant detail.]
- [8] The appearance of Velázquez is also interesting. His eyes are focused outward here. They are not focused on what is going on around him. It is a steady stare. Also interesting is his confident stance. He was confident enough to place himself in the painting of the royal court. I think that Velázquez wants the king to give him the recognition he deserves by including him in the "family." And the symbol on his vest is the symbol given to a painter by the king to show that his status and brilliance have been appreciated by the monarch. It is unknown how it got there. It is unlikely that Velázquez put it there himself. That would be too outright, and Velázquez was the type to give his messages subtly. Some say that after Velázquez's death, King Philip IV himself painted it to finally give Velázquez the credit he deserved for being a loyal friend and servant. [The writer continues doing 10 on 1 and asking *So what?*; she arrives at three tentative theses (underlined).]
- [9] I believe that Velázquez was very ingenious by putting his thoughts and feelings into a painting. He didn't want to offend the king who had done so much for him. It paid off for Velázquez because he did finally get what he wanted, even if it was after he died. [The writer concludes and is now ready to redraft to tighten links between evidence and claims, formulate a better working thesis, and make this thesis evolve.]

Description to Analysis: The Exploratory Draft

The purpose of an exploratory draft is to use writing as a means of arriving at a working thesis that the next draft can more fully evolve. Most writers find that potential theses emerge near the end of the exploratory draft—which is the case in this student draft (see the three claims underlined in paragraph 8).

This is a good exploratory draft. The writer has begun to interpret details and draw plausible conclusions from what she sees, rather than just describing (summarizing) the scene depicted on the canvas or responding loosely to it with her unanalyzed impressions.

The paper is typical of an early draft in several ways:

- It is written more for the writer as a form of inquiry than for readers. The writer reports her thoughts as they occur, but she doesn't always explain how she arrived at them or how they connect to each other.
- recognizable thesis doesn't emerge until near the end (in paragraph 8).
- The paper contains more than one potential thesis. The paper ignores the conflicts among its various theses and some of its evidence.
- The writer tends to end paragraphs with promising observations and then walk away, leaving the observations undeveloped. Rather than draw out the implications of her observations, she halts her thinking too soon in order to move on to the next piece of evidence. See, for example, this writer's repeated return to paragraph openings using "next" and "also," which traps her into listing parallel examples rather than building connections among them. As we will illustrate later, the writer can remedy this problem by querying her observations with the question "So what?"

What is especially good about the draft is that it reveals the writer's willingness to push on from her first idea (reading the painting as an endorsement of the divine right of kings, expressed by the light shining on the princess) by seeking out complicating evidence. This first idea does not account for enough of the evidence and is undermined by evidence that clearly doesn't fit, such as the small size and decentering of the king and queen, and the large size and foregrounding of the painter himself.

Rather than ignoring these potentially troublesome details, the writer instead zooms in on them, making the painter's representation of himself and of his employers the 1 for doing 10 on 1 (making a number of observations about a single representative piece of evidence and analyzing it in depth).

Starting a Revision by Looking Again at the Details: The Method

Now what? The writer is ready to rewrite the paper in order to choose and better define her thesis. She might first wish to step back a bit from her initial formulations by using The Method to again survey the details of the painting, looking for patterns of repetition and contrast.

Examples of exact or nearly exact repetitions:

the pictures in the background
the fact that both the dwarf and the painter, each on his own side of the painting, stare confidently and directly at the viewer

Examples of strands (repetition of the same or similar kind of detail):

details having to do with family
servants: dwarf, *meninas*, dog? painter?
details having to do with art and the making of art: easel, brush, paintings on wall

Examples of organizing contrasts—binaries:

royalty/commoners
employers/servants
large/small
foreground/background
central (prominent)/marginalized (less prominent)

Having used The Method to see the evidence anew, the writer would be ready to try the Six Steps for Making the Thesis Evolve. She'd begin by noticing that, as is the case in most exploratory drafts, she has several potential thesis statements vying for control of the paper.

Applying the Six Steps to *Las Meninas*

Step 1: Formulate a working thesis.

As a general rule, you should assume the presence of multiple, often competing theses, some of which you may not have yet detected. In the *Las Meninas* paper, as is often the case in early drafts, no single idea emerges clearly as the thesis. Instead, we get three related but not entirely compatible ideas vying for control of the paper (all in paragraph 8):

"I think that Velázquez wants the king to..."

Thesis 1: give Velázquez "the recognition he deserves by including him in the 'family.'"

Thesis 2: "show that his [Velázquez's] status and brilliance [as an artist] have been appreciated."

Thesis 3: give Velázquez "the credit he deserved for being a loyal friend and servant."

These three ideas about the painter's intentions could be made to work together, but at present the writer is left with an uneasy fit among them.

Step 2: See how far you can make each thesis go in accounting for evidence.

Each of the three potential thesis ideas explains some of the evidence. The writer should try on each one to see what it helps to explain.

Thesis 1: painting as bid for inclusion in the family

Evidence: the painter's inclusion of himself with the family—the king, queen, and princess—in a fairly domestic scene

Thesis 2: painting as bid for appreciation of painter's status and brilliance as an artist

Evidence: prominence of easel and brush and painter himself in the painting; painter's confident stare and the apparent decentering of king and queen; painting set in artist's studio—his space

Thesis 3: painting as bid for credit for being loyal friend and servant

Evidence: painter's location of himself among other loyal servants at court (ladies in waiting, dog, and large dwarf)

Step 3: Locate evidence that is not adequately accounted for by each thesis.**Step 4: Make explicit the apparent mismatch between the thesis and selected evidence.**

What happens when the writer begins to search for evidence that doesn't seem to be adequately accounted for by her various thesis formulations?

Thesis 1: painting as bid for inclusion in the family

Evidence mismatches: presence of painter among servants; foregrounding of servants in image and in painting's title (*The Ladies in Waiting*)—painter's large size (larger than king and queen) does not go with the idea of "inclusion," and emphasis on servants does not go with inclusion in royal family

Thesis 2: painting as bid for appreciation of painter's status and brilliance as an artist

Evidence mismatches: prominence of other servants in the painting; emphasis on family as much as or more than on artist himself—if bidding for status, painter would not present himself as just one of the servants, nor might he give so much attention to the princess (and the king and queen's regard for her)

Thesis 3: painting as bid for credit for being loyal friend and servant

Evidence mismatches: painter's prominence; his confident stare; prominence of easel and brush; small size of king and queen (smaller than servants)—if painter wished to emphasize loyalty and service, his subordinate relationship to the more powerful at court, he would have made himself and the tools of his trade less important

Step 5: Choose the claim that seems to account for the most evidence and then reshape that claim to better accommodate evidence that doesn't fit.

When you've found conflicting or inadequately explained evidence, try using it to evolve your existing thesis rather than beating a too-hasty retreat. The direction in which the writer's thinking is moving—that the painting asks for someone's strengths to be recognized—is not an entirely new start. The shift she is apparently making but not yet overtly articulating is from the painting as showcase of royal power to the painting as showcase of the painter's own power.

In order to better formulate this claim, the writer should query what she is emphasizing as the primary feature of her evidence: size, especially that of the king and queen versus the painter. She could do this by pushing her thinking with the question *So what?*

- **So what** that the king and queen are small, but the painter, princess, and dwarf (another servant) are all large and fairly equal in size and/or prominence?
- **So what** that there are size differences in the painting? What might large or small size mean?

Here are possible answers to the "So what?" questions:

- Perhaps the relative size and/or prominence of figures in the painting can be read as indicators of their importance or of what the painter wants to say about their importance.
- Perhaps the king and queen have been reduced so that Velázquez can showcase their daughter, the princess.
- Perhaps the size and physical prominence of the king and queen are relatively unimportant. In that case, what matters is that they are a presence, always overseeing events (an idea implied but not developed by the writer in paragraph 6).
- Perhaps the painter is demonstrating his own ability to make the king and queen any size—any level of importance—he chooses. Although the writer does not overtly say so, the king and queen are among the smallest as well as the least visible figures.

Given these answers to the *So what?* questions, the writer should probably choose Thesis 2—that the painting is a bid for recognition of the painter's status and brilliance as an artist—because this thesis explains more of the evidence than anything else the writer has come up with so far. It explains, for example, the painter's prominence and the relative insignificance of the monarchs: that the painter, in effect, creates their stature (size, power) in the world through his paintings. Framed in a mirror and appearing to hang on the wall, the king and queen are, arguably, suspended among the painter's paintings, mere reflections of themselves—or, rather, the painter's reflection of them.

Step 6: Repeat steps 2 through 5 as necessary.

The writer would probably want to concentrate on repeating Step 2, seeing how far she can go in making her revised thesis account for additional evidence.

Thesis: painting as bid for appreciation of painter's status and brilliance as an artist

Step 2 repeated: See how far you can make each thesis go in accounting for evidence.

Evidence:

- The painter is demonstrating that he can make the members of the royal family any size he wants, then the painting not only is a bid for recognition, but also can be seen as a playful though not-so-subtle threat: be aware of my power and treat me well, or else suffer the consequences. As an artist, the painter decides how the royal family will be seen. The king and queen depend on the painter, as they do in a different way on the princess, with whom Velázquez makes himself equal in prominence, to extend and perpetuate their power.
- In subverting viewers' expectations both by decentering the monarchs and concealing what is on the easel, the painter again emphasizes his power, in this case, over the viewers (among whom might be the king and queen if their images on the back wall are mirror reflections of them standing, like us, in front of the painting). He is not bound by their expectations and in fact appears to use those expectations to manipulate the viewers: he can make them wish to see something he has the power to withhold.
- The presence of the large dwarf in the right-hand foreground is positioned in a way that links him with the painter. The dwarf arguably furthers the painting's message and does so, like much else in the painting, in the form of a loaded joke: the small ("dwarfed" by the power of others) are brought forward and made big.

Knowing When to Stop: How Much Revising Is Enough?

We emphasize before leaving this example that the version of the thesis we have just proposed is not necessarily the "right" answer. Looked at in a different context, the painting might have been explained primarily as a demonstration of the painter's mastery of the tools of his trade—light, for example, and perspective. But our proposed revision of the thesis for the *Las Meninas* paper meets two important criteria for evaluating thesis statements:

1. It unifies the observations the writer has made.
2. It is capable of accounting for a wide range of evidence.

The writer has followed through on her original desire to infer Velázquez's intentions in the painting. As we argued in Chapter 6 (Making Interpretations Plausible), whether or not Velázquez consciously intended to make his painting a tongue-in-cheek self-advertisement, there is clearly enough evidence to claim plausibly that the painting can be understood in this way.

How do you know when you've done enough reformulating of your thesis and arrived at the best possible idea about your evidence? Getting the thesis to account for (respond to) all rather than just some of your evidence does not mean you need to discuss every detail of the subject. Writers must take care not to ignore important evidence, especially if it would alter their "case," but no analysis can address

everything—nor should it. Your job as a writer is to select those features of your subject that seem most significant and to argue for their significance. An analysis says to readers, in effect, "These are the details that best reveal the nature and meaning of my subject, or at least the part of the subject that I am trying to address."

EVOLVING A THESIS IN A LATER-STAGE DRAFT: THE EXAMPLE OF EDUCATING RITA

In this example, we will apply the Six Steps in order to make a thesis evolve within the draft, rather than to select among various as yet unformed competitors for the role of thesis (as was the case with *Las Meninas*). The process of thesis evolution we will trace here would remain visible in the writer's final draft as a means of sharing her thought processes with her readers. By contrast, the writer of *Las Meninas* would probably not include in her final draft the competition among her three potential thesis statements—only the evolution of the "winning" one.

In the film *Educating Rita*, a working-class English hairdresser (Rita) wants to change her life by taking courses from a professor (Frank) at the local university, even though this move threatens her relationship with her husband (Denny), who burns her books and pressures her to quit school and get pregnant. Frank, she discovers, has his own problems: he's a divorced alcoholic who is bored with his life, bored with his privileged and complacent students, and bent on self-destruction. The film follows the growth of Frank's and Rita's friendship and the changes it brings about in their lives. By the end of the film, each has left a limiting way of life behind and has set off in a seemingly more promising direction. Rita leaves her constricting marriage, passes her university examinations with honors, and begins to view her life in terms of choices; Frank stops drinking and sets off, determined but sad, to make a new start as a teacher in Australia.

Step 1: Formulate an idea about your subject, a working thesis.

Working thesis: *Educating Rita* celebrates the liberating potential of education. The film's relatively happy ending and the presence of the word *educating* in the film's title make this thesis a reasonable opening claim.

Step 2: See how far you can make this thesis go in accounting for evidence.

The working thesis seems compatible, for example, with Rita's achievement of greater self-awareness and independence. She becomes more articulate, which allows her to free herself from otherwise disabling situations. She starts to think about other kinds of work she might do, rather than assuming that she must continue in the one job she has always done. She travels, first elsewhere in England and then to the Continent. So, the thesis checks out as viable: there is enough of a match with evidence to stick with and evolve it.

Steps 3 & 4: Locate evidence that is not adequately accounted for by the thesis, and ask So what? about the apparent mismatch between the thesis and selected evidence. Some evidence reveals that the thesis as stated is not the whole picture. Rita's education causes her to become alienated from her husband, her parents, and her social class; at the end of the film, she is alone and unsure about her direction in life. In

Frank's case, the thesis runs into even more problems. His boredom, drinking, and alienation seem to have been caused, at least in part, by his education rather than by his lack of it. He sees his book-lined study as a prison, not a site of liberation. Moreover, his profound knowledge of literature has not helped him control his life: he comes to class drunk, fails to notice or care that his girlfriend is having an affair with one of his colleagues, and asks his classes whether it is worth gaining all of literature if it means losing one's soul.

Step 5: Reshape your claim to accommodate the evidence that hasn't fit.

The idea that the film celebrates the liberating potential of education still fits a lot of significant evidence. Rita is arguably better off at the end of the film than at the beginning: we are not left to believe that she should have remained resistant to education, like her husband, Denny, whose world doesn't extend much beyond the corner pub. But the thesis also leaves some significant evidence unaccounted for, so the writer would need to bring out the complicating evidence—the film's seemingly contradictory attitudes about education—and then modify the wording of the thesis in a way that might resolve or explain these contradictions.

Education as represented by the film seems to be of two kinds: enabling and stultifying. The next step in the development of the thesis would be to elaborate on how the film seeks to distinguish enabling forms of education from debilitating ones (as represented by the self-satisfied and status-conscious behavior of the supposedly educated people at Frank's university). Perhaps this difference is what the film is primarily interested in—not just education's potential to liberate.

Revised thesis: *Educating Rita* celebrates the liberating potential of enabling—in contrast to stultifying—education.

Step 6: Repeat steps 2, 3, 4, and 5.

Having refined the thesis in this way, the writer would then repeat the step of seeing what the new wording allows him or her to account for in the evidence. The revised thesis would foreground a contest in the film between two different kinds of and attitudes toward education. This thesis as lens would cause us to see Frank's problems as being less a product of his education than of the cynical and pretentious versions of education that surround him in his university life. It would also explain the film's emphasis on Frank's recovery of at least some of his idealism about education, for which Rita has provided the inspiration.

What else does this revised thesis account for in the evidence? What about Frank's emigration to Australia? If we can take Australia to stand for a newer world, one where education would be less likely to become the stale and exclusive property of a self-satisfied elite, then the refined version of the thesis would seem to be working well. In fact, given the possible thematic connection between Rita's working-class identity and Australia (associated, as a former frontier and English penal colony, with lower-class vitality as opposed to the complacency bred of class privilege), the thesis about the film's celebration of the contrast between enabling and stultifying forms of education could be sharpened further. It might be proposed, for example, that the film presents institutional education as desperately in need of frequent doses of "real

life" (as represented by Rita and Australia)—infusions of working-class pragmatism, energy, and optimism—if it is to remain healthy and open, as opposed to becoming the oppressive property of a privileged social class. This is to say that the film arguably exploits stereotypical assumptions about social class.

Revised thesis: *Educating Rita* celebrates the liberating potential of enabling education, defined as that which remains open to healthy doses of working-class, real-world infusions.

Repeat steps 3 and 4, locating evidence not adequately accounted for and ask so what?

At the end of the film, Frank and Rita walk off in opposite directions down long, empty airport corridors. Though promising to remain friends, the two do not become a couple. This closing emphasis on Frank's and Rita's alienation from their respective cultures, and the film's apparent insistence on the necessity of each going on alone, significantly qualifies the happiness of the "happy ending."

Having complicated the interpretation of the ending, the writer would again need to modify the thesis in accord with new observations. Does the film simply celebrate education if it also presents it as being, to some degree, incompatible with conventional forms of happiness? By emphasizing the necessity of having Frank and Rita each go on alone, the film may be suggesting that to be truly liberating, education—as opposed to its less honest and more comfortable substitutes—inevitably produces and even requires a certain amount of loneliness and alienation. Shown in Figure 11.4 are the successive revisions of the thesis.

Repeat step 5, reshaping the claim.

Final version of thesis: *Educating Rita* celebrates the liberating potential of enabling education (kept open to real-world, working-class energy) but also acknowledges its potential costs in loneliness and alienation.

Note: this last version of the thesis is the one that would appear in the writer's final paragraph, the product of qualifying and refining the paper's claim by repeatedly confronting and assimilating complicating evidence. In effect, the Six Steps have produced a reasonably complete draft in outline form.

Try This 11.3: Tracking a Thesis

As should be clear now, various versions of the thesis recur throughout a piece of writing, usually with increasing specificity, complication, and grammatical complexity. The four evolutions of the thesis statement on *Educating Rita* illustrate this pattern of recurrence clearly. One of the best ways to teach yourself how and where to locate statements of the thesis in your own writing is to track the thesis in a piece of reading. Use a highlighter to mark the evolutions. Where in the essay do you find the thesis? How has it changed in each recurrence? In response to what complication?

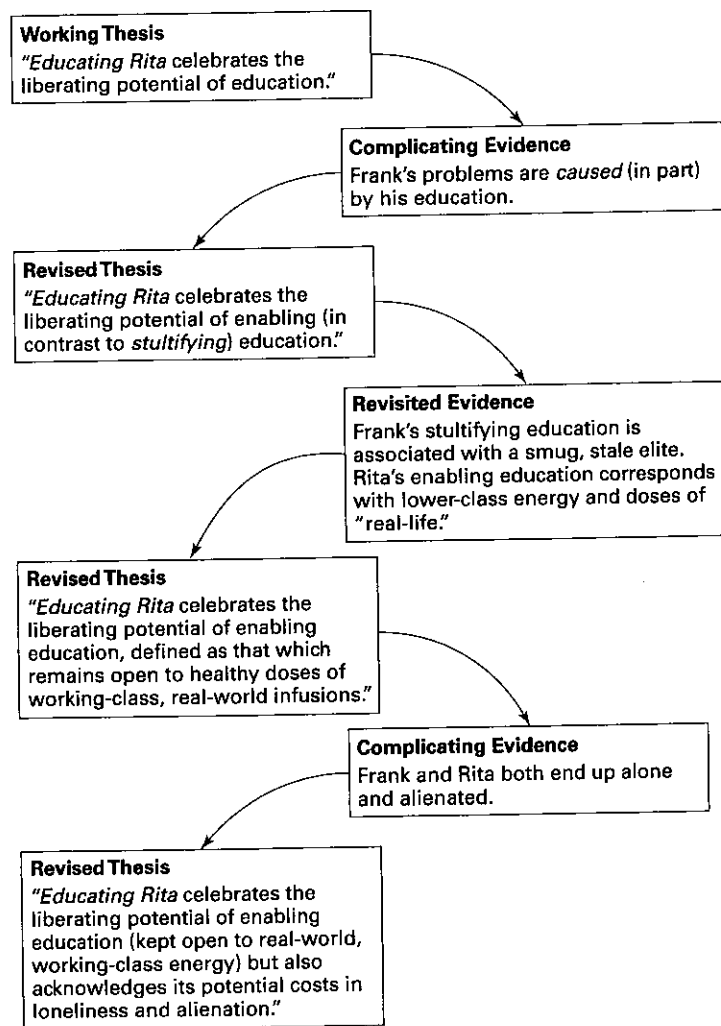


FIGURE 11.4
Successive Revisions of a Thesis. An initial thesis about *Educating Rita* evolves through successive complications as it reexamines evidence in the film.

The Evolving Thesis in Outline Form: Superman

We borrow this example from the website of the First Year Writing Program at Ohio State University, for which we offer much thanks. Like the evolving thesis in *Educating Rita*, some of the various reformulations of the thesis would appear in the final draft.

Original Thesis:

"Superman is an unchanging icon because he stands for Truth, Justice, and the American way."

Complicating Evidence:

Superman has made dramatic body-image changes in his "career."

Revised Thesis: "Though Superman's body-image has changed, his status as an icon and his message have remained steady."

Complicating Evidence:

Older body-images are met with boredom and distaste by the new generation of viewers. He has become younger and more sexual.

Revised Thesis:

"The new young, sexy Superman liberates him from past images, and caters his message to a new, more sexually sophisticated generation of viewers."

Complicating Evidence:

If Superman's body-image changes so much, doesn't this change his message automatically? What does his body-image say? Does his body speak louder than his message?

Revised Thesis:

"A young, sexy Superman liberates his image from a wholesome, community-oriented image and celebrates more explicitly a message of individuality and sexual power."

Complicating Evidence:

It is the viewers who place these demands on Superman's image. He is the "offspring" of consumers.

Revised Thesis:

"A younger and more sexualized generation of consumers has liberated Superman's image from a wholesome, community-oriented image to reflect more readily its own values of individuality and sexual power."

LOCATING THE EVOLVING THESIS IN THE FINAL DRAFT

Having achieved a final version of a thesis, what next? Why wouldn't a writer just relocate the last and fullest statement of the thesis to his or her first paragraph and then prove it?

Usually it's neither possible nor desirable to encapsulate in the opening sentences what it will take the whole paper to explain. The position articulated in the fully evolved thesis is typically too complex to be stated intelligibly and concisely in the introduction. If you approach an essay as an act of thinking, then the evolutions of the thesis record the history of your various changes in thinking as you encounter evidence. If your readers get to see these, they are far more likely to go along with you, literally to follow your trains of thought. Rather than imposing your conclusions, you will be sharing your thought process with the reader, which is what good writing does.

Normally, you lead (usually at the end of the first paragraph or at the beginning of the second) with the best version of your thesis you can come up with that will be understandable to your readers without a lengthy preamble. If you find yourself writing a page-long introductory paragraph to get to your initial statement of thesis, try settling for a simpler articulation of your central idea in its first appearance.

The first paragraph does not need to—and usually can't—offer your conclusion; it will take the body of your paper to accomplish that. It should, however, provide a quick look at particular details that set up the issue. Use these details to generate a theory, a working hypothesis, about whatever it is you think is at stake in the material. The rest of the paper will test and develop this theory.

The *Educating Rita* paper might open, for example, by using a version of the Seems-to-Be-About-X gambit (see Chapter 4), claiming that at first glance the film seems to celebrate the liberating potential of education. You could then lay out the evidence for this view and proceed to complicate it in the ways we've discussed.

Your concluding paragraph should offer the more carefully qualified and evolved version of your thesis that the body of your paper has allowed you to arrive at. Rather than just summarize and restate what you said in your introduction, the concluding paragraph leaves readers with what you take to be your single best insight. It should put what you have had to say into some kind of perspective.

Recognizing and Relocating Your Thesis: A History Professor Speaks

In the following Voice from Across the Curriculum, history professor Ellen Poteet offers suggestions on how writers might best prompt themselves to arrive at and recognize a thesis in their writing.

Voices from Across the Curriculum

- For an analytical or interpretive historical essay, *thesis* is a conventional term and one of much value. The thesis usually is that point of departure from the surfaces of evidence to the underlying significance, or problems, a given set of sources reveal to the reader and writer. In most cases, the thesis is best positioned up front, so that the writer's audience has a sense of what lies ahead and why it is worth reading on. I say *usually* and *in most cases* because the hard and fast rule should not take precedence over the inspirational manner in which a thesis comes to be formulated and recognized by the writer. It is my experience, in fact, that if inspiration strikes, one realizes it only after the fact.

Recognizing a thesis can be extremely difficult. It can often be a lot easier to talk "about" what one is writing than to say succinctly what the thrust of one's discussion is. I sometimes ask students to draw a line at the end of a paper after they have finished it, and then write one, at most two sentences, saying what they most want to tell their readers. My comment on that postscript frequently is "Great statement of your thesis. Just move it up to your first paragraph where it could begin to develop."

—Ellen Poteet, Professor of History

Try This 11.4: Moving from Observations to a Thesis

The following piece of writing is a student's exploratory draft analyzing a place—a chain restaurant located in a Boston shopping mall. It is an early draft; the writer has not yet been expected to attend to organization, style, and so on. One purpose of such idea-gathering drafts is to survey the data in order to discover one or more possible working theses.

For our purposes, the draft offers an opportunity to identify claims and assess how they connect to the evidence presented. It can also give you practice in reformulating claims on the basis of careful examination of evidence. The steps listed below are a version of the Six Steps for Making a Thesis Evolve. These steps also work well for pairs or small groups of writers working on each others' drafts.

1. Underline all of the paper's claims about the meaning of the details the writer has noticed. Star the claims that seem to be potential thesis formulations.
2. Examine the match between evidence and claims, focusing on the claims. Where do you find mismatches? Try in a sentence or two to explain the mismatch.
3. Reformulate one of the writer's potential thesis statements in a way that better accounts for the evidence. Be sure that the thesis has tension—that it generates forward momentum by casting its primary claim against another possibility. Try starting the thesis with the word "although" or use the formulation, "Seems to be about X, but is also (or really) about Y."

Mall Cuisine

- [1] At the outer reaches of an enclosed shopping mall near downtown Boston's Copley Square there is an interesting restaurant named Bon Marche. The mall is huge, connecting several high-rise hotels, and it offers dozens of upscale shops.
- [2] My friend and I entered Bon Marche just to look around; we were hungry for some breakfast, and it looked promising. Almost immediately a Latino guy about twenty wearing a green beret stopped us to give us a check. He told us that there was one for take-out and one for eating there, and then he explained how the restaurant worked. There were a number of different stations serving food, and you were supposed to give them your ticket to be stamped when you got food there. The ticket, by the way, which was designed to look like a passport, included a comical warning that if you lost it, you would be required to wash dishes there for two days.
- [3] The stations were scattered all over this enormous room, and each one offered a different kind of food. (We later learned that they had a market downstairs too, where they sold the food uncooked.) A lot of the foods were international in flavor. There was lots of seafood, especially

shellfish of various kinds. Other stations offered omelettes, sushi, wood-oven cooked pizza, fresh squeezed juices (including carrot!), soups such as chowders and bouillabaisse, crepes, Oriental stir fries, and various kinds of bread and pastries. I did notice, though, that there was no lox, though plenty of fresh salmon they would cook for you.

- [4] I noticed that at a number of these stations, you could basically design your food choice. For example, you would choose what “innards” you wanted in your omelette from a variety of ingredients in silver bowls at the front of the station. The same went for the stir fry station and the pizza station, where you chose among toppings. And most of the stations also offered vegetarian options.
- [5] We decided to have breakfast, and that’s when we discovered one drawback to this station idea. We had to wait in line for about fifteen minutes before we were able to order our omelettes. They looked and smelled great, and they came with hash browns, but when we asked for some bacon, the Latina girl who was cooking told us that we had to go to another station where they cook breakfast meats. That would mean waiting in line again, while our food was getting cold. And then we’d have to wait in line again if we wanted juice, which was at another station.
- [6] Just as there is a great variety of exotic foods, there are a lot of diverse seating areas at Bon Marche. One area was glassed-in, like a French bistro, with small white tables that had multicolored umbrellas in them. Another seemed Indonesian—rattan furniture and hay bales. We chose an area by the windows looking out over downtown Boston. It was decorated with lattices like a grape arbor at an Italian villa.
- [7] Once we noticed the international character of Bon Marche’s food and settings, we began to see it in other aspects of the place. First of all, there’s the French name of the place. And virtually all of the staff were members of ethnic minorities—especially Latinos, African-Americans, and Asians. Plus the place was awash in the upbeat rhythms of Latino music—a kind of *nouveau* sound. While most of the staff were young, the sushi counter proved an exception. That station featured two middle-aged Asian women, bent over their sushi mats, making mostly Boston rolls and California rolls, one after another after another. We were struck with how boring the job must be. How many omelettes was that woman cooking an hour, with the line getting longer every minute?
- [8] Still, the food was tasty (and inexpensive!), and the atmosphere was really interesting. I had the overall impression that Bon Marche was all about youth and choice and feeling optimistic. Considering its great location and how busy it was, the staff must make pretty good money, and so they are getting to participate in the American dream of opportunity and freedom as well.
- [9] That’s when I realized that maybe what makes Bon Marche so great is that it embodies democracy. It has everything for everybody, and the individual gets to choose what he or she wants, down to the last

detail. And the whole place was just bursting with food—there seemed to be abundance for all. It makes available to everyone the experience of international cuisines at affordable prices, whereas in the past you would have had to travel abroad, or at least to expensive restaurants all over the city, to get this diversity. Mall culture offers the world in one convenient location, as Bon Marche exemplifies.

- [10] As we were leaving, we saw more evidence for this democracy idea in the uniforms that the staff were wearing. They all had full-length aprons matching the color of their berets—the men all wore green berets while the women wore red ones. This uniform was bright and happy, and the berets seemed to symbolize that everyone was equal. Also the berets seem to go with the restaurant’s French name, except that the berets themselves had these fitted leather bases that made them seem stiffer than traditional French berets.
- [11] The cashier was located at the front of the restaurant, and when she gave us our receipts, we also received what they called “exit visas” that we then had to hand to a guy standing about four feet away, just at the interface of the restaurant and the rest of the mall. It was as if we were leaving this fantasy world behind.

GUIDELINES FOR FINDING AND DEVELOPING A THESIS

1. A thesis offers a theory about the meaning of evidence that would not have been immediately obvious to your readers.
2. A thesis is made, not found. It is the result of a process of thinking of about the evidence but is not itself present in the evidence, like a golden egg.
3. Treat your thesis as a hypothesis to be tested rather than an obvious truth.
4. Most effective theses contain tension. They are conceptually complex, and that is reflected in their grammatical shape—often they will begin with “although” or incorporate “however.”
5. The body of your paper should serve not only to substantiate the thesis by demonstrating its value in selecting and explaining evidence, but also to evolve the thesis—move it forward—by uncovering the questions that each new formulation of it prompts you to ask.
6. When you encounter potentially conflicting evidence (or interpretations of that evidence), don’t simply abandon your thesis. Use the complications to refine your thesis until you arrive at the most accurate explanation of the evidence that you can manage.
7. To check that your thesis has evolved, locate and compare the various versions of it throughout the draft. Have you done more than demonstrate the general validity of an unqualified claim?

Assignment: Making a Thesis Evolve**Formulate and Evolve a Thesis on a Film, Painting, or Other Visual Image.**

Using the models of either *Las Meninas* or *Educating Rita*, produce an interpretation of the film or painting or other visual image of your choice.

First, begin by formulating a variety of possible statements about the film or painting that could serve as a working thesis. These might be in answer to the question “What is the film/painting about?” or “What does it ‘say’?” Or you might begin by doing The Method to uncover pattern of repetition or contrast you have observed and can then explain.

Obviously, this assignment could be adapted to other subjects—an essay, the coverage of a current event, and so forth. Here are some specific suggestions:

- The contemporary appeal of a cartoon or other popular television character
- Differences in political rhetoric between Democrats and Republicans on the same issue
- The rhetoric of a popular print or television ad campaign for a familiar product, such as an insurance company or a soft drink or an automobile

Next, follow the procedure for making the thesis evolve, listed again here for convenience:

1. Formulate an idea about your subject, a working thesis.
2. See how far you can make this thesis go in accounting for confirming evidence.
3. Locate evidence that is not adequately accounted for by the thesis.
4. Make explicit the apparent mismatch between the thesis and selected evidence, asking and answering “So what?”
5. Reshape your claim to accommodate the evidence that hasn’t fit.
6. Repeat steps 2, 3, 4, and 5 several times.

SUMMARY

Summary and analysis go hand-in-hand; the primary goal for both is to understand rather than evaluate. Summary is a necessary early step in analysis because it provides perspective on the subject as a whole by explaining the meaning and function of each of that subject's parts. Within larger analyses—papers or reports—summary performs the essential function of contextualizing a subject accurately. It creates a fair picture of what's there.

Summarizing isn't simply the unanalytical reporting of information; it's more than just shrinking someone else's words. To write an accurate summary, you have to ask analytical questions, such as the following:

- Which of the ideas in the reading are most significant? Why?
- How do these ideas fit together?
- What do the key passages in the reading mean?

Summarizing is, then, like paraphrasing, a tool of understanding and not just a mechanical task.

When summaries go wrong, they are just lists, a simple "this and then this" sequence. Often lists are random, as in a shopping list compiled from the first thing you thought of to the last. Sometimes they are organized in broad categories: fruit and vegetables here, dried goods there. At best, they do very little logical connecting among the parts beyond "next." Summaries that are just lists tend to dollop out the information monotonously. They omit the *thinking* that the piece is doing—the ways it is connecting the information, the contexts it establishes, and the implicit slant or point of view.

Writing analytical summaries can teach you how to read for the connections, the lines that connect the dots. And when you're operating at that level, you are much more likely to have ideas about what you are summarizing.

Strategies for Making Summaries More Analytical

Strategy 1: Look for the underlying structure. Use The Method to find patterns of repetition and contrast (see Chapter 2). If you apply it to a few key paragraphs, you will find the terms that get repeated, and these will suggest strands, which in turn make up organizing contrasts. This process works to categorize and then further organize information and, in so doing, to bring out its underlying structure.

Strategy 2: Select the information that you wish to discuss on some principle other than general coverage. Use Notice and Focus to rank items of information in some order of importance (see Chapter 2). Let's say you are writing a paper on major changes in the tax law or on recent developments in U.S. policy toward the Middle East. Rather than simply collect the information, try to arrange it into hierarchies. What are the least or most significant changes or developments, and why? Which are most overlooked or most overrated or most controversial or most practical, and why? All of these terms—significant, overlooked, and so forth—have the effect of focusing the summary, guiding your decisions about what to include and exclude.

Strategy 3: Reduce scope and say more about less. Both The Method and Notice and Focus involve some loss of breadth; you won't be able to cover everything. But this is usually a trade-off worth making. Your ability to rank parts of your subject or choose a revealing feature or pattern to focus on will give you surer control of the material than if you just reproduce what is in the text. You can still begin with a brief survey of major points to provide context, before narrowing the focus. Reducing scope is an especially efficient and productive strategy when you are trying to understand a reading you find difficult or perplexing. It will move you beyond passive summarizing and toward having ideas about the reading.

If, for example, you are reading Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* and start cataloguing what makes it funny, you are likely to end up with unanalyzed plot summary—a list that arranges its elements in no particular order. But narrowing the question to "How does Chaucer's use of religious commentary contribute to the humor of 'The Wife of Bath's Tale'?" reduces the scope to a single tale and the humor to a single aspect of humor. Describe those as accurately as you can, and you will begin to notice things.

Strategy 4: Get some detachment: shift your focus from what? to how? and why? Most readers tend to get too single-minded about absorbing the information. That is, they attend only to the *what*: what the reading is saying or is about. They take it all in passively. But you can deliberately shift your focus to *how* it says what it says, and *why*.

To focus on how and why something is presented in a given way—whether it be a sign on a subway or the language of a presidential speech—is to focus rhetorically. Like analysis in general, rhetorical analysis asks what things mean, why they are as they are and do what they do. But rhetorical analysis asks these questions with one primary question always foregrounded: how does the thing achieve its effects on an audience? Rhetorical analysis asks not just what do I think, but *what am I being invited to think (and feel) and by what means?*

One way to distinguish a summary is to concentrate on rhetorical matters. If, for example, you were asked to discuss the major discoveries that Darwin made on *The Beagle*, you could avoid simply listing his conclusions by redirecting your attention to *how* he proceeds. You could choose to focus, for example, on Darwin's use of the scientific method, examining how he builds and, in some cases, discards hypotheses. Or you might select several passages that illustrate how Darwin proceeded from evidence to conclusion and then *rank* them in order of importance to the overall theory. Notice that in shifting the emphasis to Darwin's thinking—the how and why—you would not be excluding the what (the information component) from your discussion.