

Edited version of “Developing Your Thesis”
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Imagine that your thesis is a building with one, two, or three floors. Your reader enters the building and climbs to the highest floor to look out the window for a new perspective on the topic, text, or ongoing conversation that you’re writing about.

- A one-story thesis shows that you have read the material. Your reader is on the ground floor, and the reader’s view out the window is no different than it was before the reader entered the building.
- A two-story thesis commits to helping your reader better grasp what she/he/they may have missed. The view out the window enables the reader to see slightly more of the landscape.
- A three-story thesis challenges your reader’s understanding of the material and promises to broaden and deepen your reader’s grasp of implications and significance. Looking out the window from the third floor, the reader can see far in the distance.

One-Story Thesis

A one-story thesis demonstrates your ability to collect and report facts. A one-story thesis typically results in an essay that may be adequate, but it is dull because it doesn’t have a great deal to say. A paper with a one-story thesis describes and summarizes information, but it does not address a problem worth examining. A one-story thesis offers to “prove” a point that should be apparent to anyone who has read the material.

Example 1: In Shakespeare’s sonnet 18, the speaker compares his lover to a summer’s day in order to praise his lover’s superior beauty.

This thesis leads to description: a summer’s day is like this, the lover is like that. Most readers will make the same observation; it doesn’t need to be proven.

Example 2: In Marie de France’s poetry, some characters who indulge in adultery are rewarded for their behavior, while others are punished.

This thesis also leads to description and indicates the shape of the discussion: some things happen to these characters, other things happen to those characters. Most readers will have already noticed this fact.

Two-Story Thesis

A two-story thesis goes beyond the obvious. Rather than being a collection and reporting of facts, a two-story thesis examines how the facts work in relation to one another and thus allows for interpretation, inference, and complication. A two-story thesis generally points to a genuine

problem raised by the evidence, although it may not go all the way towards explaining a solution.

Example 1: Comparing his lover to a summer's day in sonnet 18, Shakespeare's speaker argues that his verse will confer immortality on his lover, while even the most gorgeous day will quickly fade into night.

Unlike the one-story thesis, this thesis is not immediately obvious. But while the two-story thesis is more complicated and thoughtful than the one-story variety, it is still a kind of reporting of the facts: the lover's beauty will survive, while the beautiful day will perish.

Example 2: Marie de France treats adultery very inconsistently: some adulterous characters are rewarded, while others are punished. Typically, the author rewards those characters who enter into adulterous relationships to escape from an unhappy marriage, and she punishes those who commit adultery simply for lust or profit.

Similar to example one, this two-story thesis is not obvious; the writer must use reasoning and evidence to prove the thesis to the reader. But while the two-story thesis is certainly preferable, it is still a reporting of the facts: the "good" adulterers are like this, the "bad" are like that. A good reader will be left with the question, "What are the implications of your observations?"

Missing in both one- and two- story theses: so what?

Why does it matter that Shakespeare distinguishes between eternal and transitory beauty? How does knowing this advance your understanding of the poem? Why does it matter that some adulterers are rewarded and others are punished? Why is it significant that Marie de France distinguishes between motives?

Three-Story Thesis

A three-story thesis answers the question, "Why is this idea important?" It addresses and resolves some of the complexities of a real analytical problem.

In the following examples of introductory paragraphs with three-story theses, note that every idea in the introduction builds to the thesis. Due to the complexity of three-story theses, three-story theses often are not restricted to a single sentence. Also note the use of conjunctive adverbs to signify the relationship between ideas (Common conjunctive adverbs: although, despite, however, nevertheless, and yet).

Example 1: When Shakespeare's speaker compares his lover to a summer's day in sonnet 18, he privileges his lover's eternal beauty over the transitory pleasures of a summer's day. Yet although it initially seems that the lover's beauty will last forever, the speaker eventually reveals that only his own writing will stand the test of time. Acknowledging that only those stylized aspects of his lover's beauty that can be captured in verse will survive, and not the

natural beauty suggested by the summer's day, **the speaker suggests** that he values his own poetic powers more than the actual beauties of his lover.

Example 2: The fact that in Marie de France's poetry some adulterous characters are rewarded for their behavior, while others are punished, **seems to imply** the lack of a moral standard; it appears contradictory for Marie de France to condone in one poem the same behavior that she condemns in the next. **However**, these apparent discrepancies actually reveal the presence of a profound moral system, one that looks beyond the basic fact of adultery and takes into account the motivations behind it and the means by which it is carried out. **Ultimately**, Marie de France places a higher value on individual generosity and goodwill than on adherence to the Church's official rules of conduct.

A three-story thesis is not necessarily intuitive. It seems to say, "Yes, it appears this way, but it is also like that. This is what it means and/or why it is significant." The three-story thesis is something that reasonable readers could disagree with—it takes some risks and conceivably could be disproven. Your challenge as writer is to construct an argument based on a close analysis of sources and evidence in order to persuade readers that your argument is valid. If you are successful, readers will have learned something new.

Getting from a one-story to a three-story thesis

Ask yourself questions. What is interesting about an idea? What is it related to? Why does it matter? Do the sources or other evidence endorse a particular viewpoint? What are the ramifications of this viewpoint? So what? Think about relationships between ideas.

Be specific. Pin down the parameters of the argument. If you are interested in how different authors view a particular issue, for example, which authors or works will you examine? How exactly do the authors' views differ, and why? And, most importantly, why does it matter that their views are different?

Let the evidence guide you. Read source materials multiple times. Look for patterns, connections, and themes. Is your topic more complex than you first thought? You are not trying to create a tidy argument; your goal is to develop insight into how a text actually works, how authors think, how evidence connects, what limitations exist in other writers' ideas, and, finally, how to convey your insights to your readers.

Incorporate nuance. Make clear the nuances of your thinking. Show the specific logic of the relationships between ideas. Words commonly used to link related ideas include after, although, because, despite, if, in order to, once, since, unless, until, when, and while. Common qualifiers include frequently, likely, many, most, recent, some, usually, and probably.

Seek feedback from readers: a classmate, writing tutor, trusted friend, or your professor. Find someone else to help you develop your thinking. Ask others to play devil's advocate. What are the limitations of your thinking? What are some possible counter-arguments? Which rebuttals would be effective against them?