

Developing a Thesis

The hard truth is that what makes an essay a piece of literary analysis is an argumentative, analytic thesis that addresses fundamental issues which a particular text raises:

1. **DESCRIPTIVE INFORMATION GATHERING.** Observe likenesses/differences (if you are working on several texts) or central elements (of language, imagery, form) if you are focusing on one. A good thesis never rests here.
2. Sort the data and select the central element or elements. Signs of centrality are many and varied --
 - Placement in the text (the beginning and end or the center are good places to look)
 - Recurrence or repetition (even if with slight variation)
 - What one might call "micro-placement" -- at the beginning or ends of lines, in a poem; near break points or shifts of plot/scene in a piece of prose or verse narrative
 - Pure importance and potential richness for evaluation. Here, some things fall by the wayside. Others are weak because they are too vague or general. "Love" is of undoubted importance in most human lives; but the word itself has so many shades of meaning that, to be an effective thesis, it needs full and careful definition *in the terms of the text*, not of your own predispositions or experiences.
3. Articulate fully and carefully what aspects, elements, words, and images the text associates or aligns with some central issue or problem or question. **At this point you are moving toward a coherent, focussed, precise, and economical formulation of what the text is "about."**
4. See how far you can press this package of associations and meanings, and in what ways you can pull them together into a cogent, argumentative position statement (which is, in fact, what a "thesis" is). **This takes step three as far as you reasonably can. Remember you are concerned with what the text says, not with what you yourself believe to be true. It is altogether feasible to write a good essay on a text you think is just plain wrong, or morally abhorrent (say, *Mein Kampf*).**

All of this occurs, by the way, **BEFORE** you set out to write an essay. The essay will develop and support your thesis by arraying and analyzing the specifics of the text under discussion. In other words, the essay will more or less work backward through this scheme -- opening with the thesis, then elaborating the elements of that thesis by drawing on a careful and argumentative analysis of the data you gathered in step one -- not all of it, just the most productive/significant aspects.
