

The Thesis Statement: From Observation to Structure

Many young writers are often confused by the differences between observation and analysis, and they are equally frustrated by the demands of composing a thesis-driven essay. This handout highlights the differences between observation and analysis, linking analysis to the construction of a strong thesis. This handout also looks at the strong thesis from the other end of the writing process, too, urging students to think ahead and imagine what kind of shape a thesis might give to the rest of the essay. By approaching the thesis from these two angles, we can more concretely understand its use and nature. To help students see the work a strong thesis can do and the structures motivating it, I have deliberately constructed a hypothetical thesis from materials we did not read in class. This hypothetical thesis links close reading to argumentation.

Getting to a Working Thesis

Observation

Ernest Hemingway uses a lot of "and-s" in his prose.
Hemingway's sentence structure is usually very straightforward.
Hemingway is a post-WWI writer.
Hemingway is often considered the leader of the "Lost Generation," a group of expatriate artists who fled the values of post-war American materialism.
An apparently reputable website describes the "Lost Generation" as artists who "led the way in expression of the themes of spiritual alienation, self-exile, and cultural criticism." (<http://www.ils.unc.edu/~kaisn/pathfind.html>)

Preliminary Analysis/Interpretation

The continual use of "and-s" creates a feeling of space and openness, a kind of stretched-out-ness.
The straightforward sentence structure creates a feeling of certainty, of solidity.
These seem to be in contrast to one another--space/openness, certainty/solidity. Are they? How do these techniques signify culturally?
As the leader of the "Lost Generation," Hemingway would probably be the most fitting representative of its ideals and values.
(Maybe the rejection of post-war American materialism has something to do with Hemingway's prose style.) "Spiritual alienation" implies a real from which someone is alienated, a soul or a spirit that can feel alienated, a center or core.
Alienation means distance--stretching out, not connected. Same with "self-exile."
"Cultural criticism"--the Lost Generation had a politics, had something to say. Most members of LG were writers or artists.
This would suggest that they criticized culture in their art, described their position through their writing. Thus, we can link Hemingway's prose style to his Lost-Generation-ness.

Working Thesis

While Hemingway's prose creates both a sense of openness and solidity, his dominant stylistic devices are not opposed to one another. Instead, the apparent contradiction of, on the one hand, openness and space, and on the other, solidity and certainty, accurately depicts the Lost Generation's belief that, while there is certain meaning in the world, it is difficult to find and must be pursued.

Let's look at the individual features of this sample thesis. First, note that my thesis is not one sentence long. Note, also, that I don't get into the specifics of the stylistic devices I'm working with or my analysis of the relationship between Hemingway's prose style and the ideologies of the Lost Generation. Neither, however, is the thesis too general as to be uninteresting or unrelated to my interpretation. Instead, I *describe* Hemingway's prose style in a strong, definitional way ("open," "solid," "certain"). I point out an *apparent contradiction* in my descriptive definitions. And finally, I associate my reading of these devices with a *larger interpretation*. Your *larger interpretation* should always convey a sense of *why your ideas are important*. Don't ever make your reader wonder, "Why should I care?"

Outlining from the Thesis

A thesis, apart from being argumentative, controversial, analytical, and specific, should also highlight the organizational principles of your essay—it should create a path through the woods of evidence. You might also fruitfully think of a thesis as a set of directions to the puzzle that is your essay as a whole. Let's look at the sample thesis again, focusing on what a hypothetical paper about this topic might look like, structurally speaking. In the space below, I've constructed an outline of this hypothetical paper, keeping in mind that a good thesis should give me a "road map" to the rest of my essay. This outline is not set in stone, but it should give a good indication of what I'm going to say and how I'm going to get there.

Paragraph Number(s)	Hypothetical Content
1	Introduction: open with the perfect Hemingway quotation that generally speaks to the ideals of the Lost Generation. Briefly describe the sensation of reading Hemingway's prose. Close w/thesis statement.
2 (a, b, c)	a. Clearly highlight the salient points of Hemingway's prose style, using concrete examples that will tie into the Lost Generation. Transition: characterize prose style as both open and solid. b. Describe/characterize these elements of style: what's "open" about his prose? Use concrete examples from 2a, but read them here analytically. c. Using the same concrete examples from 2a, 2b, describe the "solidness" of his prose.
3	Point out their apparent contradiction, and begin to question it
4	Suggest that this contradiction is not a contradiction at all, but a complex illustration of the values of the Lost Generation.
5	Describe the Lost Generation, paying particular attention to their identity as artists/creators that self-identify as alienated, exiled, cultural critics.

6	Point out pattern--distance and difference, yet strong, even critical identity. The nature of an expatriate, the spiritual alien, the cultural critic. In order to be spiritually alienated, must see yourself as different from, unlike the norm--you must recognize your self as different. You must have a spirit in order for it to be alienated. NOTE: this paragraph will need more work! Maybe find a way to describe this pattern using the same kind of language in paragraphs 2a-2c ("openness" and "space" like "distance" and "difference"; "solidity" and "certainty" like strong sense of identity?)
7	Point out similarity between this pattern and prose pattern.
8-9	Analyze this similarity, using a concrete example--preferably, one we've already brought up in another context, one that has this prose style and one that seems to talk about the values of the Lost Generation. See paragraph 2a.
10	Conclusion; suggest that, as artists, the Lost Generation would imbue their work with their values--not only in content, but also in form. Describe briefly why this is important.

Another Way to Outline from a Thesis

Some writers, like myself, think in more structural or visual terms. The following is another method for outlining the overall movement of your essay from the plan provided by your working thesis. Think of your essay as composed of a series of blocks, each of which function as a part of your argument; when you put them all together, you get a whole—and wholly new—text. In the example below, I've imagined my essay as roughly half pointing out my observations and roughly half analyzing those observations:

Observation	Introduction—work on this later!
	Introduce idea of the “Lost Generation”
	Describe Hemingway’s prose style
	Point out apparent contradictions
Key transition	Suggest that these apparent contradictions can be resolved by reading them through the rubric of the “Lost Generation”
Analysis	Characterize Hemingway’s style with reference to the ideas of the “Lost Generation”
	Point out the pattern between Hemingway’s style and the ideological concepts of the “Lost Generation”
	Illustrate this pattern by close reading a key example
	Conclusion—work on this later!