

[This Handout Supports Goal 1]

What is a thesis or theory?

A thesis or theory is the main point or argument you make in an essay. The thesis is stated clearly somewhere in the opening paragraph and then tested and developed throughout the essay. Although “argument” and “thesis” are probably the most common terms used to describe this crucial component of an essay (most handbooks will use one or both of these terms in their indexes) the term “theory” provides a useful way of understanding how a thesis becomes more than simply the central claim you make in a paper. A theory is your own discovery—your interpretation—that comes out of synthesizing other authors’ ideas as well as your own life experiences in relation to a particular issue, question, or debate. The thesis or theory establishes a controlling idea that gives an essay organizational focus and momentum from beginning to end. Every paragraph in the essay becomes an opportunity to introduce fresh evidence from the readings that will help you test and expand on that main idea. Once you develop a theory about some question, problem, or issue in relation to a particular set of readings, that theory provides a direction to your essay and a way of deciding which material to include and exclude.

A successful paper from W031, W130, or W131 needs a strong theory. A strong theory can help you establish a set of ideas that you can elaborate on confidently and can help you to organize your paper based on a coherent line of thought. We can understand the features of a strong theory more clearly by contrasting it with a weak theory. Here are two theories from early and rewritten drafts of a paper exploring the subject of education.

Weak theory: *Education truly promises students a path to success.*

This short, simple and obvious idea (one that repeats common knowledge or truisms) does not challenge the writer or the reader to think extensively about the topic in any complexity. While everyone certainly wishes that this statement were true, everyone also knows that the real interactions between the education system and students’ lives are much richer and more complicated. The statement above does not open up the discussion to any of this richness or complexity.

Revised theory: *While education promises success, students can realize that promise only if they can come to feel entitled to the kinds of satisfaction and achievement that academic work makes possible. Only then can they feel the commitment necessary to make their education work for them.*

This statement contains the old, weak theory, but goes beyond it, saying something about the real complexity and challenges involved in pursuing success through academic work. The writer has achieved this gain in specificity and complexity through close

engagement with his or her sources; analyzing the particular ideas and experiences of the assigned authors has helped this writer think about the real challenges involved in gaining an education. Based on this careful work with sources, the writer now has more precise ideas and key terms (*entitlement, commitment*) to work with throughout the discussion. The writer can explore how feelings of entitlement and commitment can grow, and analyze the obstacles that arise to achieving such a perspective. The writer might also explore, in another section of the paper, the specific ways in which academic work can provide satisfaction and a sense of achievement, as well as what it means for students to “make their education work for them.”

In short, in revising and developing this stronger theory, the writer now has a set of ideas, expressed in several interesting key terms and phrases, to elaborate on and unpack throughout the rest of the essay. Also, the idea is strong enough to be tested and challenged, as well as supported (for example, the writer might question her own assumption that students are primarily responsible for pursuing entitlement and commitment by considering the role of teachers and other mentors in that process).

So, in summary, **what does a strong theory do?**

- It offers *key terms* that are precise and flexible enough to guide the paper's line of thought clearly, as the writer unpacks and elaborates them.
- It helps the writer to *explain, interpret and connect several readings* actively and extensively.
- It establishes *a set of ideas* that come from the writer's own perspective and are expressed in her own voice, ideas which the writer can then *support, develop, test and question* throughout the rest of the discussion.

NOTE: Don't expect to have an effective theory already formed when you first begin to draft your paper. Strong theories are almost always discovered and developed through the processes of drafting and rewriting, reading and rereading. Wise writers often wait to construct their theories out of the strongest opinions, conclusions and insights gained from early drafts of an essay.

Here are some other examples of strong thesis statements:

Sample 1: “Social environment often makes a substantial impact upon an individual, and will result in a choice to conform, rebel, or combine both behaviors. Despite the pressure that the social environment may exert, each individual has the power to choose

to conform or to seek his or her own independence.”

Sample 2: “Family and society encourage us to be individuals, but, at the same time, they force us to conform to their ideals. As an individual, you can either conform to this ideal or become a rebel to conformity and possibly face ridicule and punishment. However, this punishment may be just if your idea of individualism is extreme.”

Sample 3: “Factors such as race and disability powerfully shape a person’s identity because it is extremely difficult not to be affected by other people’s perceptions and expectations. However, where some people try desperately to perform according to mainstream expectations in order to achieve acceptance, others deal with this obstacle by creating a separate subculture of their own.”