

Writing a Complex Thesis Statement/Shaping Your Idea

First, what are the components of a thesis statement or controlling idea? A thesis will do at least three things for your paper:

- 1) It will introduce the topic
- 2) It will take a position or stand on the issue (your argument)
- 3) It will indicate the structure of the body paragraphs (the main points you propose in support of your argument)

Here's an example of a thesis statement: *Talk shows such as The Oprah Winfrey Show and Jerry Springer portray everyone as a victim of society.* Is this statement, however, a complex thesis? With a thesis statement like this, I envision the standard five-paragraph essay which I know many of you were taught in high school:

- 1) Introduction
- 2) Body ¶ 1 – the first example of how talk shows portray everyone as a victim
- 3) Body ¶ 2 – the second example of how talk shows portray everyone as a victim
- 4) Body ¶ 3 – the third example of how talk shows portray everyone as a victim
- 5) Conclusion

While this five-paragraph structure isn't inherently "bad," you are now ready to go to the next level in your writing, which requires more complexity in your thinking and writing processes. As you can see, there is no real development of the thesis. Instead, the thesis is restated over and over again, hoping that the reader will believe the above thesis because it has been "proved" three times (I'm using the word "proved" in this handout to make a point, but I would avoid it in your actual essay).

To improve on this thesis statement, make it slightly more complex by asking yourself the "so what" question. Talk shows portray everyone as a victim of society. So what?? Answering the "so what" question will help to make the thesis more complicated. Here are some questions that might help you.

- What are some of the ways talk shows portray people as victims?
- What are some of the results of this type of portrayal?
- Why do talk shows portray people this way?
- What cultural work might this portrayal be doing in contemporary society?
- Are there/should there be limits placed upon this portrayal?

If you can answer one of these questions (or a question similar to it), you are making your thesis slightly more complex. Another way to improve your thesis is adding a “because” to it. For example, “*Because talk shows such as The Oprah Winfrey Show and Jerry Springer portray everyone as a victim of society, A happens which leads to B which leads to C*” (you argue the effects), or “*Talk shows like The Oprah Winfrey Show and Jerry Springer portray everyone as a victim of society because A happened which led to B which led to C*” (you argue the causes). This “because statement” adds complexity to your argument.

So instead of the five-paragraph essay where you “prove” the same point three times, you might be able to develop that thesis in your paragraphs:

- 1) Introduction
- 2) Body ¶ 1 – I will prove that talk shows such as *The Oprah Winfrey Show* and *Jerry Springer* portray everyone as a victim because people in America are attracted to people who seem like victims (using quotes/other evidence/analysis)
- 3) Body ¶ 2 – I will prove that because Americans like victims, people find ways to portray themselves as victims (using quotes/other evidence/analysis)
- 4) Body ¶ 3 – I will prove that people create situations for themselves that will allow them to see themselves as victims (using quotes/other evidence/analysis)
- 5) Body ¶ 4 – I will prove that these situations often do not have the desired effect (using quotes/other evidence/analysis)
- 6) Body ¶ 5 – I will prove that in an effort to portray themselves as victims, people actually victimize other people (using quotes/other evidence/analysis)
- 7) Conclusion

When considering your complex thesis statement, you should also consider what you can use as evidence, i.e., what quotations help you make your points. Also remember that each paragraph, while part of the whole essay, needs a definite shape of its own. That shape is:

- 1) A **claim** (topic sentence) in support of your argument
- 2) The **evidence** (mostly textual) in support of that claim
- 3) Your **analysis** of that evidence and how it relates back to your thesis. Without this part of the paragraph, you expect your evidence to fill in the gaps and make the connections for the reader. This generally confuses the reader and removes your voice from the essay.
- 4) A **transition** (either here or at the beginning of the next paragraph) which prepares the reader for a connection between ideas.