Thesis Statements
(and their purposes)
What is a Thesis?

- Statement expressing the *claim* or *point* you will make about your subject
- Answers the question: “What is the main idea that I’m trying to present to the reader?”
- Not the same as the *topic* of the paper
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Thesis</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Subject</td>
<td>Claim about subject</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phrase</td>
<td>Complete sentence(s)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Crime-based reality shows”</td>
<td>“Crime-based reality shows legitimize a contemporary surveillance culture by asking viewers to participate in and approve of such a culture.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
What a Thesis is Not

1. An announcement of the topic:
   “In this paper, I will discuss the Reality TV show *The Swan*.”

2. A statement of fact:
   “*The Swan* depicts women deemed ugly who undergo extensive plastic surgery and then compete in a beauty contest.”
What a Thesis is Not

3. **A summary of plot:**
   “Lieutenant Jimmy Cross in the story ‘The Things They Carried’ feels guilty about the death of Ted Lavender and determines to be a better officer in the future.”

4. **A value judgment that can’t be sustained with evidence:**
   “In the make-over show category, I prefer *The Biggest Loser* to *Extreme Makeover: Weight Loss Edition*.”
When Do I Come Up With a Thesis?

Three Questions to Answer First:
1. Why am I writing this paper? (purpose)
2. For whom am I writing? (audience)
3. What is my subject? (topic)
Working Thesis

• Draft a tentative thesis before actually writing--this will be your working thesis
• Thesis like a hypothesis. Test it against evidence as you carry out the writing process
• Change and revise your thesis if necessary to match what you actually say in the paper
Advantages of Having a Working Thesis

A good working thesis will do at least 3 things for you as you write your paper:

1. Helps you see where you are going and why (controls direction of your entire paper)
2. Helps give you a single focus for the development of your paper
3. Helps you select the material you will use in the paper
Does Every Paper Have a Thesis?

• Not creative papers, but most expository papers do
• Any type of writing that is persuasive or analytical (the type of papers you will mostly be writing in college)
• Professional writing sometimes uses an implied thesis, but best choice for students is usually to include a thesis at the beginning of an essay
Advantage of Placing Thesis at Beginning of Essay

Q: “I feel as if I’m giving everything away”
Advantage of Placing Thesis at Beginning of Essay

Q: “I feel as if I’m giving everything away”

A: You should make your purpose clear, give your essay a context in which to be read--remember, an analytic or persuasive essay is not a detective story, so don’t keep your readers in suspense until the last minute.
“They Say / I Say” Format
(from They Say/I Say, edited by Gerald Graff, et. al.)

- Academic writing means entering into a conversation with others
- Calls upon writers not only to express their own ideas, but to respond to what others have said
- REAL writing works this way
- Way to integrate outside critical views into your own arguments
Examples

• “The claim to reality of Reality TV has been so widely deconstructed by critics, however, that rather than joining the chorus line, I would like to play the devil’s advocate. If *Survivor* and its kin achieved viable ratings for at least one season, it is because something genuine, something worth calling reality took place in their artificial environments.”

--Marie-Laure Ryan, “From *The Truman Show* to *Survivor*…”
Examples, cont.

• “My daughter, who goes to Stuyvesant High School only blocks from the former World Trade Center, thinks we should fly the American flag out our window. Definitely not, I say: The flag stands for jingoism and vengeance and war.”

--Katha Pollitt, “Put Out No Flags”
Sometimes the “they” is left to readers to infer:

- “I like to think I have a certain advantage as a teacher of literature because when I was growing up I disliked and feared books.”
  --Gerald Graff, “Disliking Books at an Early Age”

What is the implied or unnamed “they say” that Graff is responding to?
They Say / I Say

• Writers use this format to disagree with others, to challenge standard ways of thinking, to stir up controversy.
• You don’t have to play it safe in your writing--making statements that nobody could disagree with.
• Such writing fails to answer the “so what” or “who cares” question.
Three Ways to Respond (to others’ ideas)

• Yes (Agree)
• No (Disagree)
• Okay, but… (Agree and disagree simultaneously)
Agree--but with a difference

• You need to do more than simply echo the views you agree with.
• Important to bring something new and fresh to the table, to add something that makes you a valued participant in the conversation
Some Templates for Agreeing

• I agree that _____ because my experience _____ confirms it.
• X is surely right about _____ because, as she may not be aware, recent studies have shown that _____.
• X’s theory of _____ is extremely useful because it sheds insight on the difficult problem of _____.
• I agree that _____, a point that needs emphasizing since so many people believe _____.
• Those unfamiliar with this school of thought may be interested to know that it basically boils down to ______.
Disagree--and explain why

• You should do more than assert that you disagree with a particular view
• You also have to offer persuasive reasons why you disagree
• Some reasons to disagree with others’ arguments:
  – Fails to take relevant factors into account
  – Based on faulty or incomplete evidence
  – Uses flawed logic
  – Is contradictory
  – Overlooks what you take to be the real issue
Some Templates for Disagreeing

• I think X is mistaken because she overlooks ______.
• X’s claim that ______ rests upon the questionable assumption that ______.
• I disagree with X’s view that ______ because, as recent research has shown, ______.
• X contradicts herself/can’t have it both ways. On the one hand, she argues ______. But on the other hand, she also says ______.
• By focusing on ______, X overlooks the deeper problem of ______.
• X claims ______, but we don’t need him to tell us that. Anyone familiar with ______ has long known that ______.
Agree and disagree simultaneously

- Often the best way of responding
- Recognizes complexity in others’ responses
- Asserts a nuanced view of your own
- Can be subtly tipped toward agreement or disagreement
Some Templates for Agreeing and Disagreeing Simultaneously

• Although I agree with X up to a point, I cannot accept his overall conclusion that _____.
• Although I disagree with much that X says, I fully endorse his final conclusion that _____.
• Though I concede that _____, I still insist that _____.
• X is right that _____, but she seems on more dubious ground when she claims that _____.
• While X is probably wrong when she claims that _____, she is right that _____.
• Whereas X provides ample evidence that _____, Y and Z’s research on _____ and _____ convinces me that _____ instead.
• I’m of two minds about X’s claim that _____: ON the one hand, I agree that _____: On the other hand, I’m not sure if _____.
Good Thesis Statements

• A good thesis is **specific**
• A good thesis asserts **one main idea**
• A good thesis is **argumentative**
• A good thesis helps **organize** your paper for you
A good thesis is specific

--More than anything, a vague thesis reflects lack of clarity in the writer’s mind and almost inevitably leads to an essay that talks around the subject but never makes a coherent point.
Examples

• John McCain lost the 2008 presidential election because he made too many mistakes.
• John McCain lost the 2008 presidential election partly because the economy fell apart during the campaign and he was slow to address economic issues.
Examples, cont.

- Tim O’Brien talks about courage in *The Things They Carried*.
- In *The Things They Carried*, Tim O’Brien undermines conventional notions concerning courage and war. Rather than behaving bravely in battle, O’Brien suggests that real courage might involve a person standing up for what he believes is right, even when his own family and community may disagree.
A good thesis asserts one main idea

- Your thesis should present one major idea and the body of your essay should support that main idea. Your thesis should also be limited to fit the assignment. Don’t allow your thesis to promise more of a discussion than you can deliver in a short essay. (Avoid the gargantuan thesis).
Examples

The Gargantuan Thesis
• The TV show *Survivor* expresses the universal struggle for human survival.

The Laundry List Thesis
• Often seen in comparison papers:
  “There are many differences and similarities in the ideas of …”
• The show *The Swan* demeans women, celebrates consumerist culture, and is irresponsible in its presentation of surgery.
Examples

Better

• The show *The Swan*, while purporting to help a specific group of women develop healthy self-esteem, actually undermines the vast majority of women in the viewing audience by enforcing unattainable standards of beauty.
A good thesis is argumentative

- Your thesis will be much more interesting if it is a statement you could imagine someone disagreeing with. Push beyond the obvious! Don’t be afraid to say something surprising or unusual.
Examples

• Mary Wollstonecraft argues that women’s reasoning abilities should be trained and developed just as men’s are.

• While Mary Wollstonecraft argues persuasively that women are rational creatures and should be educated accordingly, I’m disappointed that she does not go far enough. She argues for an equal education only so that women will be better suited to the domestic realm--that they will be better wives and mothers.
A good thesis helps outline your paper for you

- A good thesis sets up what you will have to prove in the body of your paper. Often it also determines the order in which your points will have to be made.
Examples

- At the end of William Faulkner’s “A Rose for Emily,” readers discover that Emily is insane.
- In her relationship with Homer Barron, Emily copies the twisted and repressive “love” that her father has for her. This “love” teaches Emily to cling to the past and ultimately causes her insanity in Faulkner’s “A Rose for Emily.”