

Developing a Thesis

A thesis is a statement of the point you intend to prove with your paper. The first thing you must do is choose what that is going to be! Once you have done so, keep the following in mind.

I. BE SPECIFIC: You must explicitly state the case you intend to make. A good thesis makes it clear to the reader right from the beginning what he/she is about to read.

Too general: *According to Livy in Ab Urbe Condita, book one, there are both good and bad Romans. Examples of good ones are A, B, and C. Examples of bad ones are D, E, and F.*

All this does is list some good and bad people; it does not say what characteristics are common to all the good examples and what characteristics are common to the bad ones.

Better: *According to Livy in Ab Urbe Condita, book one, a morally good Roman should possess character traits x, y, and z. This can be seen in the characters of A, B, and C. A bad Roman, on the other hand, possesses characteristics u, v, and w, which can be seen in the characters of D, E, and F.*

This example chooses a handful of specific qualities that are shared by morally good Romans and morally bad ones, states what they are, and gives a quick list of the examples that will be used to prove it.

II. CHOOSE A SIDE: You can assume your reader (magister) has read Livy I and has his own opinions; your job is to convince him that your interpretation of what Livy thinks (note that this is not about your opinion) is correct. You can't do this if you don't choose a side on an issue.

Not so good: *According to Livy in Ab Urbe Condita, book one, Roman leaders A and B are good, but on the other hand they could be viewed as bad. Livy judges leaders C and D as bad, but they also have good qualities.*

This is too wishy-washy! For this particular topic, the student is supposed to make a judgment (good or bad) for Roman leaders, but he has not decided whether he thinks they are good or bad.

Better: *According to Livy in Ab Urbe Condita, book one, what makes for a good Roman leader are qualities x, y, and z, which can be seen in the characters of A and B. A bad leader, however, possesses characteristics u, v, and w, as shown by leaders C and D.*

Although everyone is a mix of good and bad, this thesis has decided which qualities Livy thinks outweigh others, divided his choices into clearly good and clearly bad, and identified precisely the characteristics that put someone into the "good" or "bad" category.

III. FIND SOMETHING THAT LINKS ALL YOUR EXAMPLES: It is ok to have variance among your examples, but it is important to have at least one theme that unites all of your examples (or, when applicable, all your positive and all your negative examples).

Too varied: *According to Livy in Ab Urbe Condita, book one, Roman women A, B, and C are good and moral women; woman A because of quality x, woman B because of quality y, and woman C because of quality z. But Livy sees women D and E as clearly bad; woman D because of quality u, woman E due to quality v.*

This is on the way to being a good thesis, but there is nothing in common among the examples. Each example proves a different aspect of the overall point.

Better: *According to Livy in Ab Urbe Condita, book one, Roman women A, B, and C are good and moral women; woman A has admirable quality x, woman B has admirable quality y, but both these and woman C have quality z. But Livy judges women D and E as immoral, because they both possess characteristics u and v.*

Note that this thesis still will include some variance in what qualities each example has, but has identified at least one that they all have in common.

IV. ANSWER ALL PARTS OF THE PROMPT: Do not think that I will not notice if you only deal with part of the prompt.

Not so good: *In Livy's Ab Urbe Condita, book one, divine signs and supernatural events occur for purposes x, y, and z, as can be seen in events A, B, and C. They also happen for reasons u and v, as is the case in events D and E. But what unites them all is reason w.*

So far this has met all the previous criteria; it is specific, chooses specific reasons for supernatural occurrences, and gives one thematic element that unites all the examples. But if you examine the prompt, it has not answered one part of the question.

Better: *In Livy's Ab Urbe Condita, book one, divine signs and supernatural events occur for purposes x, y, and z, as can be seen in events A, B, and C. They also happen for reasons u and v, as is the case in events D and E. But what unites them all is reason w. Although these are clearly not historically verifiable events, Livy chooses to include them in a history of Rome because of reason x, as shown by any of these examples.*

Notice that this thesis has kept everything from the first, but has added a sentence to deal with the second part of the question (why Livy bothers including obviously legendary/fictitious events).