

Essay Structure

introductory paragraph	attention-getting remark
	contextualizing information
	thesis statement
analytical paragraphs	claim
	evidence
	analysis
concluding paragraph	thesis statement
	contextualizing information
	attention-getting remark

- a single sentence that clearly and concisely indicates the central argument of the essay
- not the same thing as a topic:
 - must be argumentative
 - must take a clear position on some significant issue
 - must answer the questions “Why?” and/or “How?”, and not just “What?”
- characterized by all four of “the Four S’s”: significant, single, specific, and supportable

Thesis Statement

- can sometimes be two sentences in longer essays, but one sentence is sufficient for short essays
- provides an answer to a question, a solution to a problem, and/or a statement that takes a clear position on a debatable topic
- articulates the main argument of an essay, which the body of the essay will go on to dissect and defend in its sub-arguments

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • a single sentence that clearly and concisely indicates the central argument of the essay
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • not the same thing as a topic: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – must be argumentative – must take a clear position on some significant issue – must answer the questions “Why?” and/or “How?”, and not just “What?”
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • characterized by all four of “the Four S’s”: significant, single, specific, and supportable

Thesis Statement

Topics	Thesis Statements
discursive or descriptive	argumentative or debatable
broad and general	narrow and concise
answer the question “What?”	answer the questions “Why?” and/or “How?”

- a single sentence that clearly and concisely indicates the central argument of the essay
- not the same thing as a topic:
 - must be argumentative
 - must take a clear position on some significant issue
 - must answer the questions “Why?” and/or “How?”, and not just “What?”
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Thesis Statement

significant	single
should deal with an important problem or issue in the literary text(s)	should consider one issue only, rather than attempt multiple issues
specific	supportable
should consider as narrow an issue as possible, not a generalized issue	should be defensible through evidence from the text(s)

- a single sentence that clearly and concisely indicates the central argument of the essay
- not the same thing as a topic:
 - must be argumentative
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Thesis Tests

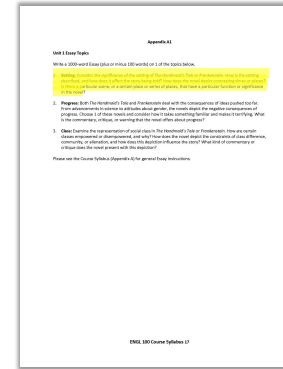
The “So What?” Test

- If the thesis statement prompts the question, “So What?” from a theoretical reader, it is probably insufficiently argumentative.
- It may mean that the thesis statement has not taken an identifiable position on a salient issue in the literary text.

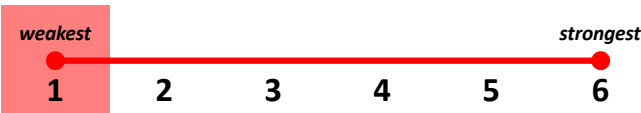
The Counterargument Test

- If there is no apparent valid counterargument to the thesis statement, it is probably insufficiently argumentative.
- It may mean that the thesis statement is too descriptive, discursive, or factual, rather than truly argumentative or debatable.

Sample Essay Topic

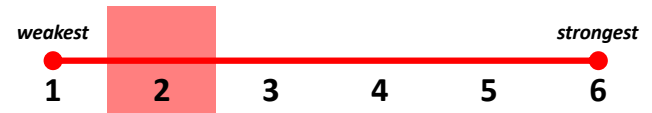


Setting: Consider the significance of the setting of *The Handmaid's Tale*. How is the setting described, and how does it affect the story being told? How does the novel depict contrasting times or places? Is there a particular scene, or a certain place or series of places, that have a particular function or significance in the novel?



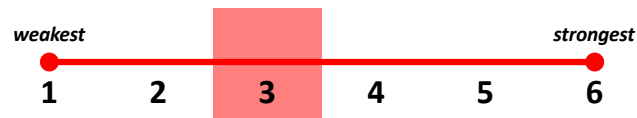
Draft Thesis 1
 X How does Atwood use setting in *The Handmaid's Tale*?

- **Avoid phrasing a thesis statement as a question:** an effective thesis statement should provide a specific answer to a question, not pose a question
- **Conclusion:** Draft Thesis 1 is phrased as a question and therefore does not provide a specific answer to a question



Draft Thesis 2
 X This essay will examine how Atwood uses setting in *The Handmaid's Tale*.

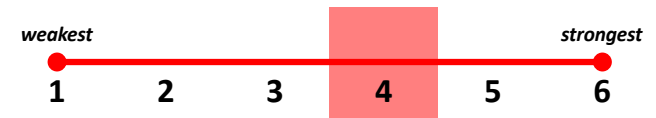
- **Avoid “This essay will ...”:** constitutes *signposting*, telling the reader “out loud” what the essay will do at some unspecified future point
- **Avoid words “why” and “how”:** thesis statement should answer these questions, not just indicate them as vague or undefined points of focus
- **Conclusion:** Draft Thesis 2 is vague and undefined because it makes use of signposting and the word “how”



Draft Thesis 3

X Setting is a significant element in Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*.

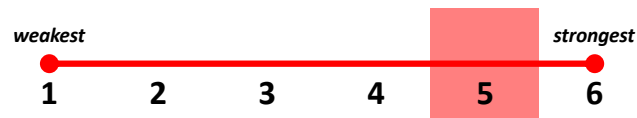
- **Apply the "So What?" Test:** setting does appear to be a significant element in the novel, but what theme does this significance point to?
- **Apply the Counterargument Test:** to suggest that setting is an insignificant element is invalid, as setting clearly plays an important role in the novel
- **Conclusion:** Draft thesis 3 is vague and observational rather than concise and argumentative



Draft Thesis 4

X Atwood uses familiar settings in *The Handmaid's Tale*.

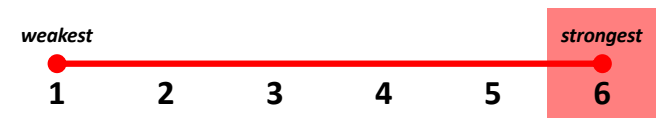
- **Apply the "So What?" Test:** Atwood does use familiar settings in the novel, but why is it significant or revealing that she uses them?
- **Apply the Counterargument Test:** to suggest that Atwood uses unfamiliar settings is invalid because it is patently obvious that she uses familiar settings throughout the novel
- **Conclusion:** Draft thesis 4 is insufficiently concise and argumentative



Draft Thesis 5

X Atwood uses familiar settings in *The Handmaid's Tale* to make a powerful statement about repressive political regimes in the modern western world.

- **Apply the "So What?" Test:** Atwood does use familiar settings in the novel to make a statement, but what, exactly, is that statement?
- **Apply the Counterargument Test:** to suggest that Atwood uses setting to make a weak statement is invalid because it turns on a value judgement
- **Conclusion:** Draft Thesis 5 is still vague and unclear because it does not adequately define "powerful statement"



Draft Thesis 6

✓ Atwood uses familiar, domestic settings in *The Handmaid's Tale* to suggest that the institution of a repressive political regime is a real possibility in the modern western world, rather than the stuff of science fiction.

- **Apply the "So What?" Test:** passes test because it advances a concrete reason why Atwood uses familiar settings
- **Apply the Counterargument Test:** passes test because another critic could potentially advance a different, equally valid reason for why Atwood uses familiar settings
- **Conclusion:** Draft thesis 6 is a strong thesis because it is concise and argumentative

For More Information

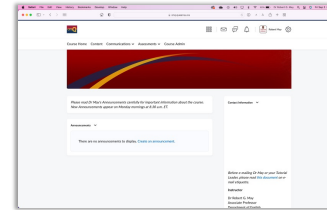
Dr May's Class Web Site
<https://www.queensu.ca/academia/drrgmay/docs/>

- Essay Writing Notes

The Purdue Online Writing Lab
<https://owl.purdue.edu/>

- **Tips and Examples for Writing Thesis Statements:** General Writing > The Writing Process > Creating a Thesis Statement
- **Developing Strong Thesis Statements:** General Writing > Academic Writing > Establishing Arguments
- **Developing a Thesis for a Literary Paper:** Subject-Specific Writing > Writing in Literature > Writing About Fiction

Quiz 1



<https://onq.queensu.ca>

- test your knowledge of Writing Seminar 1 by writing Quiz 1
- access the Quiz on onQ (under "Assessments" > "Quizzes")
- the Quiz consists of a series of multiple-choice questions
- the suggested due date for this Quiz is this Friday, but you may complete it anytime this term
- this Quiz is worth 3% of your final grade

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