

Day 8: Thesis Workshop Handout

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Thesis Workshop Handout

Building a Thesis: Three Stories

Thinking of the components of a thesis as stories in a building is one way (of many) to describe what makes up a good thesis.

1st story: **describes** the topic; gives the facts; makes an observation; lays the foundation. This level of thesis makes observations that are non-controversial, i.e. no reasonable person would disagree with them. A person reading such a thesis immediately thinks: *"Yes, this is true."*

1st story dangers:

- Do not make it too obvious or over-generalize. This is worthless.
- Do not make it too controversial. This weakens the foundation for the rest of your thesis because some readers will not be on board yet.
- Make sure it is meaningful and relevant to your own specific goals.

2nd story: **interprets**, gives a point of view on, and/or adds controversy to the facts of the first story. By adding controversy, it takes a position on the facts that is not obvious: a position that a reasonable person could disagree with. A person reading a two-story thesis thinks: *"That's an interesting hypothesis... now prove it to me."*

2nd story dangers:

- Do not state something obvious that has only one possible answer. You need to take a position that is one of several possibilities.
- Do not make your thesis so controversial that it is absurd or idiosyncratic. This is doomed to fail horribly, painfully, and utterly.

3rd story: **relates** the two-story thesis to the bigger picture, explains its **significance**, and sets it in a new context. I find it helpful to think of this story "opening out"—as if through a skylight—to a wider view. It is the answer you get when you ask of a two-story thesis, "so what?" The reader should say: *"I see why this argument matters."*

3rd story dangers:

- Do not get too ambitious and make a claim too big to substantiate.
- Do not say something vague and mysterious.

Paul Revere example:

1st story: America experienced an industrial and commercial revolution in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. Many artisans, such as Paul Revere, attempted to expand their operations to take advantage of new manufacturing techniques, widening markets, and increased consumerism.

2nd story: Revere's manufacturing endeavors had a greater historical impact than his peers' operations because of his groundbreaking services as a government contractor. The government's controversial support allowed him to overcome the capital and technological limitations that inhibited most other American manufacturing endeavors.

3rd story: Revere's success illustrates the critical importance of government aid to new technological endeavors. In spite of the government's small size and inexperience, it had an impact upon American industry as early as the end of the eighteenth century.