

Creating a Thesis for your Research Paper

Coming up with a thesis can be daunting if you don't have much experience writing college papers. A thesis is the heart of a paper, so understanding what a thesis is and how to create one is essential for writing a solid paper. A thesis basically is the point your paper is attempting to prove, and therefore needs to be specific, arguable, and placed within proper context.

- Before creating a thesis, you must first decide the topic of your paper. The scope of topics you can write about is up to your professor, and some professors will give you more freedom than others. For this example, let's say that our professor has told us to write a research paper about the Anglo-Saxon epic poem, Beowulf. We can make any argument we want, we just need to write about this poem. **This is not our thesis, but rather our topic.**
- So what do we know about Beowulf? It was written by some guy and is about some other guy who did some things. **This isn't a thesis either.** This is just a summary and some background information. It could certainly be included in our paper and may provide some good context for our introduction, but it does not convey an argument or a point of view.
- What else do we know? Beowulf contains Christian themes and ideas, even though the characters are pagan and is set in a time before Christianity spread through Northern Europe. **This is a promising lead, but not a thesis. It doesn't yet answer the questions "how?" "why?" or "so what?"**
- So, what is significant about this observation we've made about the poem? Well, the Beowulf poem, despite being obviously written after the Christianizing of Britain, does not characterize the pagan characters negatively. In fact, the opposite is true. Despite not being a Christian, Beowulf is a heroic character. **Perhaps then an interesting thesis could be:**

"Though Beowulf contains many Christian themes and references¹, the poet's reverence for the pagan characters and their heroic exploits illustrates the shift in Britain during this time from paganism to Christianity when people still clung to their traditions and legends despite practicing their new Christian faith²."

- This is a claim that needs evidence, which can be found in the Beowulf text. We need to prove that there are Christian themes in the book present alongside positive characterization of the pagan characters. We need to use quotes that exemplify the reverence for the bygone pagan age and quotes that exemplify the Christian beliefs of the poet himself. Because the above sentence makes a **specific argument** with a **clear point of view** that contributes to a wider academic conversation about the poem AND will require a body of paragraphs to prove its point, we can be sure we have a proper thesis on our hands.

¹ This contextualizes your argument. Here, you're signaling to the reader that you are aware that other research has examined the issue of Christian themes in the poem and that you're going to contribute to this conversation in some way.

² Here you're making a specific, arguable claim that you can support with evidence from the text.