



## FORMULATING A STRONG THESIS

by the student editors of ***TACKLING YOUR FIRST COLLEGE PAPER***,  
a Students Helping Students™ book

Once you've picked a general topic for your paper, you need to come up with a thesis. Your thesis is the main and focal point of your paper and it's the position you'll take on your particular topic. Formulating a strong thesis is one of the most important things you need to do to ace your paper.

A good way to move from a topic to a thesis is to try to rephrase your topic as a question. For example, if you're writing about beer steins (mugs) in a Bavarian poem, you might ask: "What is the meaning of the beer steins in this Bavarian poem?"

Your answer to the question may very well be your thesis: "The beer steins serve as a symbol for masculine insecurity."

A thesis is a claim that you can argue for or against. It should be something that you can present persuasively and clearly in the scope of your paper, so keep in mind the page count. If possible, your thesis should also be somewhat original.

*"Your thesis should make an analytical argument. That is, it should go beyond summary. To make sure this is the case, you should ask yourself whether someone could contend that your thesis is wrong. If so, you have succeeded in proposing an analytical argument."*

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To give you a better idea, here are some examples of not-so-great theses:

- Germany lost World War II.
- Crime and Punishment is about death.
- Is the Cold War really over?

One is a fact, one is a half-baked interpretation, and one is a question. All of them have an element that sounds vaguely thesis-like, but they all fall short of being real theses. The first statement isn't really controversial and you can't make a great argument about it. The second is too vague and needs a bit more focus. The third statement doesn't make a claim, but asks a question. It's a first step to a thesis, but it's not one yet.

All of these statements have the kernel of an idea. To turn them into theses, it's important to add a touch of justification and explanation. For example, "Germany lost World War II because Hitler's expansionist vision spiraled out of control toward the end of the war." This could be a thesis. It makes a point that can be argued for and against, and it's one that can be reasonably supported with evidence.