

Getting Started

There are three levels at which you can look at and talk about texts:

UNDERSTANDING, which involves understanding what's happening, literally, in the story.
INTERPRETING, which involves inferring meaning based on what's happening, and
CRITIQUING, which involves evaluating what the author has done, the meaning (s)he's created by means of what's happening in the story.

Because they require your unique perspective and more complex analysis, essays that interpret and critique texts are more interesting and *earn better grades* than those that merely demonstrate understanding of texts. Your thesis should reflect which of these levels you're dealing with.

Formulating a Thesis

1. Start by tearing apart the essay question you've been given. Circle key words or phrases, identifying *exactly* what it is you've been asked to do.
2. Brainstorm, writing down whatever comes to mind in relation to those key words and phrases. Include in your brainstorm questions as they come to you, or emotional responses you have to certain aspects of the text. If you're having trouble brainstorming, focus on questions like the following: *What is this story really about? What is the most important question to be asked/answered about this story? What is essential to this story?*
3. Review your brainstorming work carefully, eliminating ideas that seem irrelevant or insufficient for an entire essay. Choose a couple of main ideas you think might make for an effective thesis.
4. Keeping your mind focused on these ideas, go back to the text; scan it, noting those places in the text that support your idea and any that contradict it. Now you have enough information to write a preliminary thesis.
5. Circle the key words in your thesis: can you make them more specific or informative? Ask yourself, "what exactly do I mean by x?" Rework the sentence several times, making sure it reflects the level you'll be dealing with (see "understanding-interpreting-critiquing" above), revising it into your final thesis.

How can I test my thesis to make sure it's effective?

1. Turn your thesis into a question. Theses that answer "*Why*" questions tend to be much more effective than theses that answer "*What*" questions:

What does Swift do with the Sleeping Beauty character? (less effective)

Why does Swift characterize Aurora as a drug addict? (more effective)

2. Ask yourself this: does my thesis present an argument or just describe what I discuss in the essay? You want to tell your reader what your point is in the thesis, so it should present an argument.