



## Some Advice on How to Construct a Thesis

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**I. Rationale:** Good thesis construction is essential for writing a history paper, but it's essential for many other academic subjects, as well as life in general. You need to know how to construct and defend a thesis for science experiments, English papers, and math research. You also might find thesis construction useful when trying to convince your parents that you should be allowed to do something, like go to a party, or buy a new pair of jeans, or get your driver's license. From those daily interactions with parents, most students know more about thesis construction than they realize. This guide will help you to hone those skills you already possess, and apply them to your academic work.

### II. How to Formulate Your Thesis

1. Start by reading your texts with care, and then let genuine curiosity take over. Your thesis should start with a one-sentence research question that encapsulates that curiosity. So, for example, why was there so much talk of virtue at the time of the American Revolution, or, why were the Greek City States unable to maintain long-term political unity?
2. Be sure that your research question is directly relevant to the texts you are reading, and that the evidence to answer to your question can be found in those texts. This is especially important if you are assigned a packet of readings to use as the basis for a research paper. If you are responsible for gathering your own "packet" of resources, this rule still holds. Your question must be grounded in the texts you are reading, and if you do not find sufficient evidence to answer your question, then you will need to locate texts that do help you to answer your research question. If you cannot find the answer to your question in the sources you have, you probably need to modify or reformulate your research question.
3. Remember that the best research questions do not have factual or yes/no answers. If you can Google a quick answer to your question, it's not the kind of question that will lead to a good thesis. If the answer to your question is obvious, you do not have a good research question. The best research questions are usually "why" or "how" or "to what extent" questions that express genuine curiosity about specific issues, processes, motivations, outcomes, etc. that are as yet unknown, or at least highly debatable.
4. Closely read your sources to begin to formulate an answer to your research question. That answer is your initial thesis. So for example:  
Research Question: *Why were the Greek City States unable to maintain long-term political unity?*  
Answer, or Thesis Statement: *The Greek City States were unable to maintain long-term political unity because most of the poleis applied their concept of democracy to their own internal affairs, but not to their external relationships with one another.*
5. It is important to note the following:



- a. Your thesis will likely evolve and change as you continue to read your sources. That's good. It means you are taking your sources seriously, listening to them carefully, *exegeting rather than isogeting* your texts.
  - b. Sometimes a thesis evolves a full 180 degrees. In other words, your final thesis, the answer to your research question, may prove to be the exact opposite of what you initially wanted to argue. Again, that's good, because it suggests that you are reading your sources with care, and are interested in finding the truth.
6. There are always several possible answers to a good research question. The task of your thesis is to convince the reader that your answer is the best one among all the possible answers. How do you do that? By giving your reader convincing evidence from the texts, to prove that your answer is correct. So your evidence should support and prove your thesis, as well as deal with the major objections or disagreements that others might have to your thesis. Be sure that your evidence is directly relevant to your thesis, that it reflects an accurate reading of the text, and that it unambiguously supports, rather than detracts from your thesis.

### III. Common Thesis Construction Problems

1. **The thesis is irrelevant to the documents under consideration.**  
Remember that your thesis must specifically pertain to the document(s) and issues you are studying. An illustration of the problem: if you are examining a document on the administration of *encomienda* by the Spanish conquistadors, your thesis should be based on the information contained in that document. If you write that "the *encomienda* system was unfair," or immoral, etc., this is certainly true, but it is not directly related to the documents in question. That sort of thesis will give the world no new knowledge about the *encomienda*, or the conquistadors, or the document, or early colonization tactics, etc. A caution: irrelevancy is common when students are formulating theses about issues of real moral repugnance. Moral outrage in these situations is understandable and good, but is not, on its own, a legitimate basis for most historically-based theses.
2. **The thesis is not debatable, or is too cautious.** Don't be afraid to be daring and creative, as long as you can prove that what you are arguing is true. No one wants to say something and hear others respond, "well, duh!" An example of a "duh" thesis would be: The Greek City States were unable to maintain long-term political unity because most of the poleis kept fighting with each other. Avoid "duh" kinds of theses. Don't bite off more than you can chew, or less.
3. **The thesis is impossible to prove.** Avoid theses that are grandiose, that have such a wide scope that they are impossible to prove in the seven to ten pages typically allotted to you as a student researcher. Similarly, theses that can't be proved without predicting the future should be avoided. You can make some predictions about future patterns based on your research, but this



kind of information is best placed in the conclusion, as a possible direction for further consideration.

4. **The thesis is imprecise in wording, or lacks nuance or sufficient specificity.** A thesis is like a contract: you must state exactly what you are going to deliver to the reader and then deliver it. With any contract, the devil is in the details, so be very, very precise, and very, very careful about what you want to argue.

#### **IV. Common Evidence Problems**

1. **The evidence is true but is not supportive of your thesis.** So, as per the example above, if you provide copious evidence that the Greek City States each had a democratic government, that may be true, but does not explain why they did not get along with each other.
2. **The evidence is not relevant to your thesis.** An example of irrelevance would be providing the reader with explanations and evidence about ancient Greek architecture. Interesting though it may be, it has nothing to do with your thesis about political stability among the City States.
3. **The evidence is redundant with the thesis. The evidence is redundant with the thesis.** (sic!) Often, students provide evidence that isn't evidence at all, but is really just another way of restating the thesis. So for example, providing the reader with lots of information and examples of the political and military fighting between the Greek City States is interesting, but redundant. It doesn't advance the thesis, or prove it, but just restates it. This is (sort of) like talking louder in the hopes of communicating with someone who does not speak your language.