Narrowing Your Thesis

by Sophia Tutorial

WHAT'S COVERED

This tutorial explains why narrowing a thesis is important, and provides strategies for doing so, in two parts:

1. Narrowing a Thesis
2. Narrowing a Thesis: Tactics
   a. Ask Questions
   b. Occasion for Writing
   c. Thesis Questions

1. Narrowing a Thesis

One thing that the best academic essays have in common is a very specific thesis. The most effective academic arguments are based on theses that encompass only what can be effectively addressed in an essay. One of the common mistakes that student writers make is to choose a thesis that is too broad for the assignment. Essays that are based on a thesis that is too broad usually include too much information and, as a result, don't go into enough detail when considering that information. Because of the overly-broad thesis, there's too much to cover in a short essay (e.g., five, seven or ten pages).

However, writers who choose a thesis that is too narrow sometimes find that they don't have enough material to work with. This occurs less frequently, especially among beginning writers. When it seems that your thesis may be too narrow, more research can help you to broaden it. Consider the following examples of thesis statements and determine whether they're too broad or too narrow.

Suppose your assigned subject is "electronic communication." You need to write a persuasive essay about something within this broad subject area. Your essay should not exceed four double-spaced pages in length. Would the following thesis be a good one for this assignment?

Talking to strangers — and even friends — online is becoming more and more common, but we're losing more than we're gaining.

Does that sound like an argument you could make effectively in four pages? Consider this part of the thesis: "talking to strangers — and even friends — online." It encompasses a range of communication types including email, chat, online dating sites, Facebook, comments on YouTube videos and more. All of these forms fall

within the range of this thesis and, therefore, all of them must be addressed in those four pages.

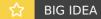Here's another sample thesis, written for the same assignment:

Online video chatting with strangers is a fascinating way to have new experiences.

This thesis is more specific than the preceding example, but is it too narrow? It is focused on an area within the assigned subject, but a writer who defended this claim might have a hard time filling four pages with worthwhile information.

Here's another example of a thesis that was written in response to the assignment above:

Paid online dating sites are changing the way couples meet, and this has in turn changed our understanding of what it means to "date."

This thesis is specific; it is focused on a particular aspect of the broad assigned subject. Its claim — that online dating has changed our understanding of dating — is one that a writer could defend adequately in four pages.

⭐ **BIG IDEA**

Thesis development, like the other steps in the writing process, must conform to the rhetorical situation and the occasion for writing in order to produce the best results.

2. Tactics for Narrowing a Thesis

The tactics for narrowing theses are the ways in which experienced writers ensure that their writing projects are focused and effective.

2a. Ask Questions

The most practical way to focus a thesis statement is to ask questions about it. Asking who, what, when, where, and why about your thesis (and your subject) will enable you to identify a thesis that is too broad, and can help you to understand what you want to write about.

Consider the following working thesis statement:

America needs to reduce emissions of greenhouse gases, and there are many ways to do so.

This is a broad thesis. The writer will likely want to narrow it before beginning the research or drafting steps of the writing process. To do so, he or she can ask some questions about it:

- What are you arguing, and who are you trying to convince?
- Why are you writing about this topic?

Suppose you are the writer who is making this argument to your classmates. You want to convince them that they should also urge others to cut America's production of greenhouse gases. You want to do this because you believe it would improve the lives of everyone. Based on these assumptions, you might make a stronger argument if you made your thesis more specific and shifted its focus. When trying to convince classmates to change something, the following thesis might better-suited to the task:

Americans cause more carbon dioxide emissions than any other people on the planet, but there are five easy ways that you can reduce them.

By moving the focus of the thesis from "America," the nation, to "Americans," your intended audience, you've narrowed your thesis (making it easier for you to write about in a four-page paper), and you've engaged your intended audience directly.

2b. Occasion for Writing

Another similar tactic that writers use to narrow their theses is to think critically about their *occasion for writing*. By taking into account the rhetorical situation in which they write, and the specific requirements of the writing assignment or prompt, they can determine how their thesis could be changed to better suit their needs. Let's consider the broad thesis from the preceding example:

America needs to reduce emissions of greenhouse gases, and there are many ways to do so.

How can careful consideration of the occasion for writing help this thesis? Suppose the assignment, in addition to the broad topic, included a specific instruction that writers must try to persuade readers to agree with something. Does the current working thesis address this requirement? Yes, but not very well. The only form of persuasion it allows for is an argument that America should cut its emissions. In addition to being an overly-broad argument, it is also one that is probably unnecessary; it is not one that needs to be made to fellow students, most of whom understand that greenhouse gas emissions are bad.

There may, however, be something useful (with respect to the assignment) within that broad claim. For example, if you argued that coal-based electricity production is one of the leading causes of greenhouse gas emissions, but that most coal-producing states have ecologically-sound energy production alternatives, you could write a persuasive argument about this topic for your audience.

2c. Thesis Questions

Another tactic used to refine thesis statements involves examining the thesis question (or questions) that your thesis statement answers. Identifying what kind of question it is (i.e., a question of fact, preference, definition, interpretation or policy) will help you to understand not only what kind of argument you're trying to make, but what kind of argument you *want* to make.

🚩 **HINT**

Questions of fact and preference tend to be simple and are therefore more likely to involve thesis statements that are less interesting.

One strategy is to turn questions of fact and preference into questions of definition, interpretation, or policy. Doing so often leads to a more specific answer, and a more specific thesis. For example, the broad thesis used in the example above — that America must cut its emissions of greenhouse gases and there are many ways to do it — is an answer to questions of fact:

- Does America need to cut its emissions? Yes.
- How can this be done? Many ways.

If you changed these questions into a question of interpretation, for example, it might look something like this:

- While there are many ways that America could reduce its emissions of carbon dioxide, which ways would

be best?

A thesis that answers this question is much more likely to be sufficiently specific for the assignment, as in the following example:

The biggest threat to America's air quality is an easily solved problem: stop burning coal.

This thesis is more specific and defensible than the original, broad thesis.

There are many ways to narrow a thesis. The next time you need to do so, try one (or more) of these tactics to improve your argument, and your essay.

	SUMMARY

This tutorial focused on the narrowing of thesis statements. The ways to identify an overly-broad thesis and three tactics for doing so were provided, along with examples.

Source: Adapted from Sophia Instructor Gavin McCall