

III. How To Build A Preliminary Thesis Statement From Scratch

Unlike many other teaching methodologies of academic writing (citation here), we asked our students to make the building of a thesis statement the very first thing to do in writing an academic paper. No doubt, the building of a thesis statement cannot be fully completed until the entire paper is completed, for it may have to be modified whenever some new information is discovered in the process of writing. However, if one did not begin writing a paper with a reasonably clear thesis statement, one would not be able to proceed with a clear and precise direction, and therefore would not be able to write effectively and efficiently.

The following are the practical steps we asked students to take in building a preliminary thesis statement from scratch.

1. Find a Noun or Noun Phrase that can best describe the main topic of your research paper.

Step 1 enables you to (i) build the central idea of the research from scratch, and (ii) identify the most fundamental keyword of the research. The noun or noun phrase should be broad enough to capture the whole of the research interest but no more.

e.g. Human Mind.

2. Build a Sentence based on the noun or noun phrase by adding a verb or predicate.

Step 2 enables you to elaborate the research and make it more informative. However, contrary to the advice from some academic writing teachers [citation here], it is not encouraged to make the sentence as informative as possible at this stage. A research direction must be established before that. Without the direction, one will proceed without a purpose, and easily get lost in the details of information.

e.g. Human mind is like a computer.

3. Turn the sentence into a Question that is of interest to you.

Step 3 enables you to establish a direction for the research. Research is by nature an inquiry or investigation. It cannot get started without a question. And as far as question is concerned, it covers *How*, *Why*, etc. The direction differs depending on the question. For example, "Why did you come to Japan?" is significantly different from "How did you come to Japan?". The former asks for an 'open' explanation about the reason, whereas the latter asks for a 'closed'

What Is A Thesis Statement And How To Build One From Scratch

Paul W. L. Lai

Copyright 2011

explanation about the procedure or method. Answer to the Why-Question is usually more difficult than the How-Question.

e.g. Why is human mind like a computer?

4. Give a Hypothetical Answer to the question.

Step 4 enables you to generate a hypothesis for the research. In generating the hypothesis, you are encouraged to brainstorm as much as possible by providing as much and specific information as possible. For this reason, the hypothetical answer here can be as long as a paragraph, although one is not encouraged to write more than that.

e.g. Human mind is like a computer in many ways. But basically, they are the same in how they process symbol-like representations such as "2", "=", etc. Both of them are sensitive only to the syntactic properties, but not the semantic properties, of the symbols.

5. Summarize the answer into just One Sentence.

Step 5 enables you to crystallize the hypothetical answer and transform it into a one-sentence thesis statement.

e.g. Human mind is like a computer in the way they process symbol-like representations.

6. Modify the one-sentence thesis statement until it expresses a Clear Relation between the sentence's Subject and Predicate.

Step 6 is a very crucial step in the process of building a preliminary thesis statement. The relation between the subject and predicate in a thesis statement is very important. The clarity of a thesis statement ultimately depends on the clarity of the relation presented in the statement, which serves to connect the statement's subject and predicate together. If the relation linking the subject and predicate is clear, then the thesis statement is clear. If the relation is unclear, then the statement is also unclear.

Furthermore, it would be wise to keep the relation between the subject and predicate as simple and straightforward as possible. The ultimate objective of an academic paper, through assembling and arranging the premises, is to prove that the relation between the subject and predicate expressed in a thesis statement is true. So if the relation between the two were complicated, then the tasks of proving the relation would also become complicated.

What Is A Thesis Statement And How To Build One From Scratch

Paul W. L. Lai

Copyright 2011

e.g. Human mind and computer are basically the same in the way they process symbol-like representations.

7. Highlight and eliminate the Ambiguities tainted with the subject and predicate of the thesis statement.

Step 7 is another crucial step in the process of building a preliminary thesis statement. Note that although a thesis statement is normally written in just one sentence, it by no means suggests that the training on how to build the statement only requires the writer to know how to properly construct a sentence in a grammatical sense. The ambiguities in question are associated with a research idea rather than merely the grammatical presentation of the idea.

Indeed, during the early stage of the training, many students of our course paid attention only to the sentence-level problem in building a thesis statement. They often overlooked the problems that arise beyond the sentence level, e.g. the ambiguities associated with the meaning of a sentence or sentence parts. For example, the sentence, “The bank is located in central London”, is grammatically correct but not clearly specified. The meaning of the word, “bank”, is tainted with what logicians call *the lexical ambiguity*,¹ since it can refer to either a financial institution or a river bank (e.g. the bank of Thames river).

In the elimination process, you are also required to eliminate vagueness of the statement. For example, the sentence, “Smoking is hazardous to health”, is correct in grammar but vague in meaning. Readers of this sentence would not be able to grasp the exact meaning of “hazardous”. It would be more specific – and hence suggestive – if the sentence were changed into, for example, “Smoking is likely to cause heart disease”.

e.g. Human mind and computer are basically the same in the way they process symbol-like representations.

8. A preliminary thesis statement is formed.

e.g. Human thinking and computational operations work in basically the same way when they process linguistic symbols.

¹ See the website, “Introduction to Logic”, by Oxford University. <http://logic.philosophy.ox.ac.uk>