

## Generating Theses

Although generating a thesis is only the first step in writing an argumentative or research paper, writers of such papers are unlikely to succeed without one. Of course, not all formal writing hinges on an explicit thesis, but most writing in academia does. Without a thesis, an argumentative paper wanders, and a research paper becomes a data dump. John Bean discusses many strategies for stimulating thesis development in thesis-governed academic writing, including stating propositions for students to support or refute, presenting questions that demand a thesis-governed answer, and giving assignments that require problem-thesis organization. I here excerpt the last idea, as well as a similar task translated for research papers:

### **A Generic Problem-Thesis Assignment:**

Write an essay of X pages on any topic related to this course. Use the introduction of your essay to engage your reader's interest in a problem or question that you would like to address in your essay. Show your reader what makes the question both significant and problematic. The body of your essay should be your own response to this question made as persuasive as possible through appropriate analysis and argumentation, including effective use of evidence. Midway through the course, you will submit to the instructor a prospectus that describes the problem or question that you plan to address and shows why the question is (1) problematic and (2) significant.

### **Stress the Asking of Research Questions:**

Help students think of their research topics in terms of a question or problem rather than a topic area. (Urge students not to say, "I'm doing a term paper on schizophrenia," but rather to say, "I'm trying to find out whether recent developments in the chemical treatment of schizophrenia are effective.") By teaching question asking, teachers can remind students of the difference between an "all about" paper and a thesis-governed paper focused on a problem. An effective way to emphasize question asking is to word your term paper assignment in the following way:

Pose an interesting problem or question, appropriate to this course, that will require a combination of library [or field or laboratory] research and your own analytical skills to answer. The quality of your research paper will depend on the quality of your initial question. I will be working with you early in the term to help you pose a productive question.

Another alternative is to give your students a problem to explore or a thesis to defend.

--Bean, John C. Engaging Ideas: The Professor's Guide to Integrating Writing, Critical Thinking, and Active Learning in the Classroom. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001. pp. 90, 206-7.

Jean-Marie Kauth  
Writing Director