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Developing Your Thesis

> [There are] one-story intellects, two-story intellects, and three-story intellects with skylights. All fact collectors, who have no aim beyond their facts, are one-story men. Two-story men compare, reason, generalize, using the labor of the fact collectors as their own. Three-story men idealize, imagine, predict; their best illumination comes from above, through the skylight.
>
> (Oliver Wendell Holmes, Sr., "The Poet at the Breakfast Table" 50)

The thesis, usually expressed in one or two sentences, is the central, organizing claim of your paper. Holmes's distinction above between one-, two-, and three-story intellects is a useful way to think about your thesis.

- A one-story thesis shows that you have read the material.
- A two-story thesis commits to helping your reader better grasp what s/he may have missed.
- A three-story thesis challenges your reader's understanding of the material and promises to broaden and deepen your reader's grasp of implications and significance.

A one-story thesis may be adequate for some situations, but it is limited in scope, and your reader is unlikely to find a one-story-thesis challenging or engaging. Why stay on the ground floor when you can see the view from above?

Know your objectives

To decide whether to develop a one-, two-, or three-story thesis, you need to know your objectives. The level of analysis you pursue depends on the assignment's goals. At times, a one- or a two-story thesis is an adequate response, for instance, for an assignment asking you to summarize a reading or respond to a specific question. But because a paper driven by a three-story thesis demands that you address a real analytical problem, it will be more challenging for you to write, more engaging for your reader, and will result in a superior paper.

One-story thesis

A one-story thesis demonstrates your ability to collect and report **facts**. A one-story thesis typically results in an essay that may be adequate, but it is dull because it doesn't have a great deal to say. A paper with a one-story thesis describes and summarizes information, but it does not address a problem worth examining. A one-story thesis offers to "prove" a point that should be apparent to anyone who has read the material.

> *Example 1:* In Shakespeare's sonnet 18, the speaker compares his lover to a summer's day in order to praise his lover's superior beauty.

This thesis leads to description: a summer's day is like this, the lover is like that. Most readers will make the same observation; it doesn't need to be proven.

> *Example 2:* In Marie de France's poetry, some characters who indulge in adultery are rewarded for their behavior, while others are punished.

This thesis also leads to description and indicates the shape of the discussion: some things happen to these characters, other things happen to those characters. Most readers will have already noticed this fact. A one-story thesis will leave the good reader with a lingering question: "So what? Tell me more."

Two-story thesis

A two-story thesis goes beyond the obvious. Rather than being a collection and reporting of facts, a two-story thesis **examines how the facts work in relation to one another** and thus allows for interpretation, inference, and complication. A two-story thesis generally points to a genuine problem raised by the evidence, although it may not go all the way towards explaining a solution.

> *Example 1:* Comparing his lover to a summer's day in sonnet 18, Shakespeare's speaker argues that his verse will confer immortality on his lover, while even the most gorgeous day will quickly fade into night.

Unlike the one-story thesis, **this thesis is not immediately obvious**. But while the two-story thesis is more complicated and thoughtful than the one-story variety, it is still a kind of reporting of the facts: the lover's beauty will survive, while the beautiful day will perish.

> *Example 2:* Marie de France treats adultery very inconsistently: some adulterous characters are rewarded, while others are punished. Typically, the author rewards those characters who enter into adulterous relationships to escape from an unhappy marriage, and she punishes those who commit adultery simply for lust or profit.

Similar to example one, this two-story thesis is not obvious; the writer must use reasoning and evidence to prove the thesis to the reader. But while the two-story thesis is certainly preferable, it is still a reporting of the facts: the "good" adulterers are like this, the "bad" are like that. A good reader will be left with the question, "What are the implications of your observations?"

Missing in both one- and two- story theses: *analysis*.
Why does it matter that Shakespeare distinguishes between eternal and transitory beauty? *How* does knowing this advance your understanding of the poem? *Why* does it matter that some adulterers are rewarded and others are punished? *Why* is it significant that Marie de France distinguishes between motives?

Three-story thesis

A three-story thesis (the one with Holmes's skylight) answers the question, "Why is this idea important?" It addresses and resolves some of the complexities of a real analytical problem.

> The three-story thesis, clearly the most ambitious of the three types, can be enormously satisfying…. Holmes remarks that illumination…comes from "above the skylight." The skylight metaphor suggests a mind that lets light in, that is open to a world outside itself and is ready to learn and question. The very best papers are built on three-story theses.
>
> (Rosen and Behrens 86)

In the following examples of introductory paragraphs with three-story theses, note that every idea in the introduction builds to the thesis. Due to the complexity of three-story theses, three-story theses often are not restricted to a single sentence. Also note the use of conjunctive adverbs to signify the relationship between ideas (Common conjunctive adverbs: *although, despite, however, nevertheless*, and *yet*).

> *Example 1:* When Shakespeare's speaker compares his lover to a summer's day in sonnet 18, he privileges his lover's eternal beauty over the transitory pleasures of a summer's day. *Yet* although it initially seems that the lover's beauty will last forever, the speaker eventually reveals that only his own writing will stand the test of time. Acknowledging that only those stylized aspects of his lover's beauty that can be captured in verse will survive, and not the natural beauty

suggested by the summer's day, the speaker suggests that he values his own poetic powers more than the actual beauties of his lover.

Example 2: The fact that in Marie de France's poetry some adulterous characters are rewarded for their behavior, while others are punished, seems to imply the lack of a moral standard; it appears contradictory for Marie de France to condone in one poem the same behavior that she condemns in the next. *However*, these apparent discrepancies actually reveal the presence of a profound moral system, one that looks beyond the basic fact of adultery and takes into account the motivations behind it and the means by which it is carried out. Ultimately, Marie de France places a higher value on individual generosity and goodwill than on adherence to the Church's official rules of conduct.

A three-story thesis is not necessarily intuitive. It seems to say, "Yes, it appears this way, but it is also like that. This is what it means and/or why it is significant." The three-story thesis is something that reasonable readers could disagree with—it takes some risks and conceivably could be disproven. Your challenge as writer is to construct an argument based on a close analysis of sources and evidence in order to persuade readers that your argument is valid. If you are successful, readers will have learned something new.

Getting from a one-story to a three-story thesis

Ask yourself questions. What is interesting about an idea? What is it related to? Why does it matter? Do the sources or other evidence endorse a particular viewpoint? What are the ramifications of this viewpoint? So what? Think about relationships between ideas.

Be specific. Pin down the parameters of the argument. If you are interested in how different authors view a particular issue, for example, *which* authors or works will you examine? *How* exactly do the authors' views differ, and *why*? And, most importantly, *why* does it matter that their views are different?

Be guided by evidence. Read source materials multiple times. Look for patterns, connections, and themes. Is your topic more complex than you first thought? You are not trying to create a tidy argument; your goal is to develop insight into how a text actually works, how authors think, how evidence connects, what limitations exist in other writers' ideas, and, finally, how to convey your insights to your readers.

Consider nuances. Make clear the nuances of your thinking. Show the specific logic of the relationships between ideas. Words commonly used to link related ideas include *after, although, because, despite, if, in order to, once, since, unless, until, when,* and *while*. Common qualifiers include *frequently, likely, many, most, recent, some, usually,* and *probably.*

Use readers: a classmate, writing tutor, trusted friend, or your professor. Find someone else to help you develop your thinking. Ask others to play devil's advocate. What are the limitations of your thinking? What are possible counter-arguments? Do you need more evidence to be convincing?

Additional examples of introductions with three-story theses

for Classics 350

In *The Republic*, Plato argues that poetry often corrupts both the individual and the city. Poetry that lies or imitates seems especially pernicious to the creation and preservation of the ideal state. Consequently, poetry should relate only truth and poets should compose only

narrative poetry. For Plato, only true content and narrative form can encourage the construction and preservation of the *polis*. These restrictions assume, however, that poetry remains incapable of illuminating existence in a novel manner, that only philosophy can deepen our understanding of life. Plato, in this sense, establishes a hierarchy where philosophy becomes the highest vocation and poetry becomes a lowly and subservient art. This formulation however, seems misguided and detrimentally narrow. Wallace Stevens, in "homunculus et la Belle Etoile," argues against Platonic restrictions on poetry. Indeed, Stevens suggests that the aesthetic nature of poetry offers an existential perspective absent in philosophy. Poetry, in this respect, illuminates rather than corrupts, and complements rather than challenges philosophical logic.

for History 390

The main theological, social, and political aspects of the early Christian church and society rested on the idea and value of the individual. While this ideal of individuality and equality seems at first liberal in essence, the early Christian church never progressed the idea past valuing the individual to valuing the individual above the common good. Where liberal individualism posits the superiority of the individual over the collective, early Christian individualism envisioned a world of individuals working towards God's common good. The early Christian church was, therefore, individualistic without being liberal, focused on the individual only as a means of glorifying God and advancing the kingdom of heaven on earth.

for Government 285

Claims that the American environmental movement undermines traditional democratic values are wrong. In fact, the movement emphasizes a commitment to compromise and a concern for the greater good that characterize the American democratic tradition. Critics argue that supporters of the environmental movement threaten fundamental constitutional rights. Critics also question environmentalists' use of lobbying, arguing that these tactics result in disproportionate attention given to environmental concerns. While it is true that environmentalists often advocate the adoption of policies that may restrict individual behavior, they do so within legally sanctioned bounds, recognizing that they are but one player in the formulation of public policy. By advocating for more stringent environmental standards, supporters of the environmental movement seek to persuade the American population to look beyond individual desires and to consider the broader impact of individual decisions. In so doing, environmentalists exhibit values consistent with the American tradition of civic mindedness, in which collective interests, rather than individual desires, represent the highest priority.

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--Sharon Williams, June, 2009

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