

The Thesis

Now that you have chosen your movie and done some background reading, you are ready to formulate your tentative thesis. This is often one of the more difficult parts of the research paper because you have to understand your sources, make decisions about what to include in your paper, and formulate a plan in a concise statement. Remember, you are not trying to find a right answer. You are deciding what you think is a strong position that you can support using your sources.

The thesis is a formal, exact statement of what your paper is going to be about. In other words, what are you trying to prove in your paper? Remember that a thesis is to an essay what a topic sentence is to a paragraph. It should state your topic and indicate the purpose of your paper as well as the organizational plan that you intend to follow.

For example, when writing an essay that discusses the critics' opinions of what was good and bad about a movie, you will present a conclusion about the overall value of the movie based on those opinions; this conclusion is called your **stance**. Then you need to categorize those opinions that support your stance and put them in your thesis in the order that they will be discussed in your paper. Consider the following example:

Although *Ghost* was a touching, romantic movie that was a phenomenal hit at the box office, the movie ultimately fails because of a bland script, poor acting, and shortsighted directing.

When you are choosing the three or four aspects of the movie to discuss, your thesis might also read something like this:

Not only does *A Dry White Season* have all the elements of a good movie, but it also educates the audience about the injustice of apartheid in South Africa and the brutal treatment endured by many of its citizens.

For this paper, keep in mind the following requirements for your thesis:

1. It must include the stance, or your overall statement of the value of the movie
2. It must include **at least three** topics that support your stance. These will be the topics, in order, of your body paragraphs.
3. The topics must be grammatically parallel.
4. You **may** include a topic that concedes an important opposing point, but it will be an extra body paragraph and will not count as one of the three that supports your stance.
5. Think of your thesis as an argument. What are you going to argue about the value of the movie based on your reading?
6. **The thesis will be the last sentence of your introductory paragraph (the first paragraph of the paper).**

Your working thesis may change as you write your paper, but it must always match the order of topics listed in your outline and supported in your paper.

The Outline

When you have your tentative thesis, you can begin to develop your working outline. Although every documented essay (like every other essay) will have three main parts—an introduction, a body and a conclusion—you will **only outline the body paragraphs of your paper**. An outline is important because you will organize the notes from your sources based on the ideas in the working outline. The outline will map the body paragraphs of your paper. Again, the introduction and conclusion will **not** be part of the outline.

Breaking it Down: Every outline for this paper must have at least three Roman numerals (I, II, and III). Every Roman numeral must have at least an A and a B. **Remember, on any outline, for every A you must have a B, and for every 1 you must have a 2.** This is because you cannot break an idea into fewer than two parts.

Keep in mind that the outline is like a table of contents for your paper. I should be able to follow your outline as I read your paper, and I should be able to see exactly what I'm going to read about next. Be sure your paper and outline match.

Topics: We will be writing **topic outlines** for this assignment. This means each heading for each subsection of your outline will be a topic. A topic is always a word or phrase, not a complete sentence. Topics are not titles, so you will not use title capitalization. **Capitalize** the first letter of the first word of each topic (in addition to proper nouns, of course). Also, the words on an outline must be your own. Never use direct quotations, copying word for word from an article. Finally, try to make topics within each subsection **grammatically parallel**. For instance, if you use a noun phrase for the topic of Roman numeral I, then you should also use noun phrases for II, II, and IV. If A is a verb phrase under Roman numeral I, then B, C, and D should be verb phrases as well.

Format (see the sample student paper for an example): Spacing is very important on an outline. You must indent each new division of the outline. Put the letter or numeral of each division directly below the first word of the larger heading above. Begin each heading with a capital letter.

Your outline is not officially part of your paper, so you will head it separately from your paper. Be sure you use the MLA format for headings. The title on your outline should match the title of your paper. The thesis statement follows the title. The thesis statement here should be explicitly labeled, and it should match, word for word, the last sentence of the introductory paragraph of your paper. Also, your thesis should match your outline by listing the main topics in the same order as your body paragraphs.

Problems to Avoid in Your Outline

1. Be sure that your thesis matches your outline. The points in your thesis must match the Roman Numerals in your outline.
2. Avoid phrasing headings/subheadings as questions
3. Use periods after outline numbers and letters (but not after the headings)
4. Headings/Subheadings should not be written in complete sentences. Make them as short as possible.
5. Follow correct formatting/spacing procedures. Note how the letter for a subheading lines up under the first letter of the heading above it. Also, if the heading/subheading runs into a second line, be sure to indent that line as well—it should line up with the beginning of the heading.
6. Avoid specific details or statistics in your outline. Only include general topic.
7. Capitalize the first letter of every heading/subheading.
8. Always break down subheadings further if possible.