

Writing a Thesis
By Michael Barsanti

1. Think of your thesis as a project. It might be easiest to think about this project as having two parts: the first where you say something about the work at hand (a reading), and a second where you explain what the consequences or uses of this reading are. This approach can be structured as a brief formula:

"I want to show you [something in the text] in order to say [something you should care about]."

2. Your thesis should apply specifically and exclusively to the works at hand. If your thesis could apply to several other works in addition to the one(s) you are writing about, you need to narrow it down.

The story of Kate Swift in Sherwood Anderson's Winesburg, Ohio tells us that communication is important.

This thesis is so vague that you could plug in nearly any story and it would still work.

3. Your thesis must not invoke or rephrase a cliché.

The story of Louise Bentley is a perfect example of "once bitten, twice shy."

4. Your thesis must not make any kind of claim about Society, The History of Mankind, People Since the Beginning of Time, All the People of the World, Everyone Who Ever Lived, etc.
5. Your thesis must do more than express judgments about the characters in the texts. They are not human beings. They do not exist outside the text. They cannot change, no matter how much you may want them to. You may talk about them as having a psychology with motivations and feelings and the like, as long as this discussion is in service of a larger point and shows awareness that the character is a carefully constructed representation inside a carefully and deliberately constructed work.

Instead of:

The Reverend Hartman is a deeply frustrated man.

Try:

Sherwood Anderson uses descriptions of body parts, especially hands, to show that Reverend Hartman is a deeply frustrated man.