



CHAPTER 03

the act of writing | what's the point | all about thesis

Your **THESIS** is a gift you give to your essay. Better, even, your **THESIS** is a gift you give to your reader. To make an essay work beautifully, and to help the reader understand you, the **THESIS** clearly sets forth the direction the essay will take. The thesis organizes your ideas for you as you write your essay; it organizes the ideas of the essay as a reader reads it. Your **THESIS** is the heart of the communication that unites you with your essay and unites your essay with your reader.

what is a thesis?

What is a **THESIS**? What can a **THESIS** do for you?

- Your **THESIS** states the *main idea* of your essay.
- Your **THESIS** tells your reader *why* you are writing this essay.

To understand what a **THESIS** does, we can learn from the way that scientists use **THESIS**:

The Thesis in Science

In scientific research, scientific theory, and scientific knowledge, the scientist always has a **THESIS**, and s/he has to prove it or disprove it. Some great moments from the history of science:

- **THESIS:** The earth is flat. (Christopher Columbus took care of that one.)
- **THESIS:** The sun and the planets all revolve around the earth. (Copernicus **disproved** that **THESIS** in the 16th Century.)
- **THESIS:** Penicillin can cure many bacterial infections. (Alexander Fleming **proved** that **THESIS** in 1928, curing, among other serious diseases, staphylococcus infections, strep throat, etc.)
- **THESIS:** The moon is made of green cheese. (Astronauts Neil Armstrong, Michael Collins, and Buzz Aldrin **disproved** that **THESIS** when they landed on the moon on July 21, 1969.)



What Makes a Good Thesis?

A good **THESIS**:

- States something that is not obvious and is not just a statement of facts;
- States an idea that requires discussion, evidence, and proof;
- Is narrowly focused;
- Makes an argument—an argument you *care* about. The more you care, the better you will write.

Not a good THESIS:

A good THESIS:

Today is Monday. (Obvious)	History supports the superstition that bad things happen on Mondays. (Not obvious; requires discussion, evidence, and proof.)
Abraham Lincoln was the 16th President of the United States. (Obvious)	We still rely, today, on the human values Abraham Lincoln defined for us when he delivered the Gettysburg Address on November 19, 1863. (Not obvious; requires discussion, evidence, and proof.)
Rain is wet. (Obvious)	Acid rain is a major destructive ecological problem. (Not obvious; requires discussion, evidence, and proof.)
Bears live in the woods. (Obvious)	As humans take over more wild land for development, bears come into towns in search of food. When they do, we should kill them (or: we should not kill them). (Not obvious; requires discussion, evidence, and proof.)
Beethoven was an important composer. (Too broad, too general.)	Beethoven's late quartets broke the mold of musical composition to establish new forms that would last into the 21st Century. (Specific and focused.)
Weather is important. (Too broad, too general.)	As we face global warming, we should look to past major climate changes, such as the Irish Potato Famine, the Depression-era drought in the U.S., the Biblical famine in Egypt, etc. to guide us in planning for the challenges global warming presents to us. (An argument.)
Public schools generally serve bad food in their lunchrooms. (A statement, not an argument.)	Schools that serve bad food in their lunchrooms harm their students and should turn to fresh, unprocessed, whole foods for better health and eating patterns. (An argument.)
Beautiful architecture is nice. (A statement, not an argument.)	The historical architecture of Chicago makes it an important, vital city to visit. (An argument.)

Let's now review the first paragraph of N. Scott Momaday's essay "The Way to Rainy Mountain" to both refresh our memory and determine his **THESIS**. We'll repeat the first paragraph of "The Way to Rainy Mountain." Read it over to remind yourself of what Momaday writes. Then, we'll find Momaday's **THESIS**.

An author (including you) might put the **THESIS** at the beginning of an essay or put it in later, after he or she has developed the work. Or, as in the case of N. Scott Momaday's essay, the **THESIS** may be implied. The author may not state it directly, but we can discover the **THESIS** from reading the work. Momaday doesn't state his thesis, but we can figure it out pretty easily.

The Way to Rainy Mountain

A SINGLE KNOLL rises out of the plain in Oklahoma, north and west of the Wichita Range. For my people, the Kiowas, it is an old landmark, and they gave it the name Rainy Mountain. The hardest weather in the world is there. Winter brings blizzards, hot tornadic winds arise in the spring, and in summer the prairie is an anvil's edge. The grass turns brittle and brown, and it cracks beneath your feet. There are green belts along the rivers and creeks, linear groves of hickory and pecan, willow and witch hazel. At a distance in July or August the steaming foliage seems almost to writhe in fire. Great green and yellow grasshoppers are everywhere in the tall grass, popping up like corn to sting the flesh, and tortoises crawl about on the red earth, going nowhere in plenty of time. Loneliness is an aspect of the land. All things in the plain are isolate; there is no confusion of objects in the eye, but *one* hill or *one* tree or *one* man. To look upon that landscape in the early morning, with the sun at your back, is to lose the sense of proportion. Your imagination comes to life, and this, you think, is where Creation was begun.

* * *

When you write an essay, we have suggested that you ask yourself our signature question: **WHY AM I WRITING THIS ESSAY?** The answer to that question will lead you to your **THESIS**. When we ask this same question of Momaday—**why is N. Scott Momaday writing his essay?**—we will discover his **THESIS**. In the second line, Momaday writes about "my people." In the rest of this paragraph, he describes his people with an intensely detailed description of the landscape they inhabit. He concludes that the landscape is so unique and so beautiful that you may think this "is where creation was begun."

From all this, we might decide that Momaday, wanting to tell us about his heritage, has this **THESIS** in mind:

A severely beautiful and sacred-feeling landscape has shaped the life and culture of my people, the Kiowas.



34 PART 1 | ORIGINS OF LANGUAGE I: *The Cave at Lascaux*

As you learn to write well, it would serve you better to state your **THESIS** early on in your essay. For example, Momaday might have begun his essay:

A severely beautiful and sacred-feeling landscape has shaped the life and culture of my people, the Kiowas.

Do you think Momaday continues, in his full essay, to develop this **THESIS**?

Looking back at the selection from Momaday in Chapter 2, page 21, if we were to write an essay *about* Momaday, would any of the following work well as our **THESIS**?

In “The Way to Rainy Mountain,” N. Scott Momaday demonstrates that the landscape shapes the culture of a people.

or

When N. Scott Momaday returns home to honor the death of his grandmother, he also revisits the culture of the golden age of the Kiowas.

or

In his journey home to honor the death of his grandmother, N. Scott Momaday preserves the dying culture of the Kiowas by writing about it.

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Chapter Review: Thesis

A Good Thesis:

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- Tells the reader why you are writing this essay.
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