

The Evolving Thesis

You now know what a thesis is—a claim about the meaning of some feature or features of your subject—but what does a thesis *do*? What is its function? Its function is to focus inquiry, providing a principle of selection that makes some evidence more relevant than other evidence. It also works to guide development of your ideas, leading you to greater precision and accuracy about what things mean. The static thesis, as we demonstrate in the previous chapter, provides organization but sacrifices thinking. By contrast, the evolving thesis both prompts and organizes your thinking.

The first step in composing a productive working thesis is to recognize that one will not appear to you, ready-made, in the material you are analyzing. In other words, a restatement of some idea that is already clearly stated in your subject is not itself a thesis (though summarizing analytically may help you to find a thesis). The process of finding a thesis—an idea about the facts and ideas in your subject—begins only when you start to ask questions about the material, deliberately looking for places where there is something to be curious about—something, in short, that seems to you to require analysis.

The second step in composing a productive working thesis is to recognize that a working thesis will only be relatively adequate. It won't explain all of the relevant evidence equally well. More often than not, when inexperienced writers face a situation in which evidence seems to be unclear or contradictory, they tend to make one of two unproductive moves: they either ignore the conflicting evidence, or they abandon the problem altogether and look for something more clear-cut to write about.

In fact, you should *expect* to find evidence that will complicate your thesis. *Complicating evidence is something for which your thesis does not account.* When you don't seek to complicate—to find exceptions to and questions about—your claims, you inevitably oversimplify. As we note in Chapter 3, meanings are multiple, which is to say that most things, even the simplest everyday objects and gestures, mean different things at the same time, depending on context.

If you are doing 10 on 1 and using The Method (see Chapters 5 and 2, respectively) in a genuinely exploratory fashion, rest assured that you will find things for which your thesis does not account. Often these emerge when you look for what we

have called difference within similarity. The examples in the strands you detect won't be *exactly* alike, and the very act of deciding that your "1" is a representative case will have made you aware of subtle differences among the examples from which you have chosen the typical one. So, too, the organizing contrasts you find will point to conflicts, to issues that are at stake within your subject. These are all sources of complication. Alternatively, the complicating evidence may at first have seemed not to fit within the scope of your thesis, or it may actually lie outside your scope—in either case, it is evidence that will help you to specify more accurately the limits of your thesis.

Faced with evidence that complicates your thesis, the one thing *not* to do is run away. The "problem" you have discovered offers a chance to modify your thesis rather than abandon it. *The complications you encounter are an opportunity to make your thesis evolve.* Formulating a claim, seeking out conflicting evidence, and then using these conflicts to revise the claim are primary movements of mind in analytical writing. The savvy writer will take advantage of opportunities to make complications overt in order to make his or her claim respond more fully to the evidence. This is how a thesis evolves.

A. MAKING THE THESIS EVOLVE

Let's begin with an example of how to make a thesis evolve. Say that you're looking for a trend (strand) in contemporary films you've seen and, as a working thesis, you claim that "women are more sensitive than men." If you were to seek out data that would complicate this overstated claim, you would soon encounter evidence that would press you to make some distinctions that the initial formulation of this claim leaves obscure. You would need, for example, to clarify what you mean by "sensitive" and how you were assessing its presence and absence. Evidence might also lead you to consider whether men, although not demonstrative about certain kinds of tender feelings, nonetheless show them in ways different from the ways women do. And surely you would want to think about how the films represent women's sensitivity. Are women punished for it in the plots? Are they rewarded with being liked (approved of) by the films, even if this trait does cause them problems?

Such considerations as these would require significant reformulation of the working thesis. By the end of the paper, the claim that "women are more sensitive than men" should have evolved into a more carefully defined and qualified statement that reflects the thinking you have done in your analysis of evidence. This, by and large, is what good concluding paragraphs do; they reflect back on and reformulate your paper's initial position in light of the thinking you have done about it (see Figure 6.1).

But, you might ask, isn't this reformulating of the thesis something a writer does before he or she writes the essay? Certainly some of it is accomplished in your prewriting—the exploratory drafting and note taking you do before you begin to compose the first draft of the essay. But your finished paper will necessarily be more than a list of conclusions. To an extent, all good writing recreates the chains of thought that leads writers to their conclusions. Your revision process will have weeded out various false starts and dead ends that you may have wandered into on the way to your finished



FIGURE 6.1
The Evolving Thesis. A strong thesis evolves as it confronts and assimilates evidence; the evolved thesis may expand or restrict the original claim. The process may need to be repeated a number of times.

ideas, but the main routes of your movement from a tentative idea to a refined and substantiated theory should remain visible for readers to follow. (See "Locating the Evolving Thesis in the Final Draft" later in this chapter for a more extensive discussion of how much thesis evolution to include in your final draft.)

✎*Try this:* Using as a model of inquiry the treatment of the example thesis "Women are more sensitive than men," seek out complications in one of the overstated claims in the following list. These complications might include conflicting evidence (which you should specify) and questions about the meaning or appropriateness of key terms (again, which you should exemplify). Illustrate a few of these complications, and then reformulate the claim in language that is more carefully qualified and accurate.

Welfare encourages recipients not to work.

Religious people are more moral than those who are not religious.

School gets in the way of education.

Herbal remedies are better than pharmaceutical ones.

The book is always better than the film. □

The Reciprocal Relationship Between Thesis and Evidence: The Thesis As a Camera Lens

What we have said so far about the thesis does not mean that all repetition is bad or that a writer's concluding paragraph should have no reference to the way the paper began. One function of the thesis is to provide the connective tissue, so to speak, that holds together a paper's three main parts—its beginning, middle, and end. Periodic reminders of your paper's thesis, its unifying idea, are essential for keeping both you and your readers on track.

But, as we also argue, developing an idea requires more than repetition. It is in light of this fact that the analogy of a thesis to connective tissue proves inadequate. A better way of envisioning how a thesis operates is to think of it as a camera lens. This analogy more accurately describes the relationship between the thesis and the subject it seeks to explain: while the lens affects how we see the subject (what evidence we select and what questions we ask about that evidence), the subject we are looking at also affects how we adjust the lens.

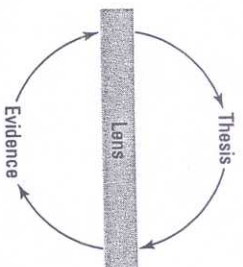


FIGURE 6.2
The Reciprocal Relationship Between Thesis and Evidence. Like a lens, the thesis affects the way a writer sees evidence. Evidence should also require the writer to readjust the lens.

Here is the principle that the camera-lens analogy allows us to see: the relationship between thesis and subject is *reciprocal* (see Figure 6.2). In good analytical writing, especially in the early, investigatory stages of writing and thinking, *the thesis not only directs the writer's way of looking at evidence; the analysis of evidence should also direct and redirect (bring about revision of) the thesis*. Even in a final draft, writers are usually fine-tuning their governing idea in response to their analysis of evidence.

The enemy of good analytical writing is the fuzzy lens—an imprecisely worded thesis statement. Very broad thesis statements, those that are made up of imprecise (fuzzy) terms, make bad camera lenses. They blur everything together and muddy important distinctions. If your lens is insufficiently sharp, you are not likely to see much in your evidence. If you say, for example, that the economic situation today is bad, you will at least have some sense of direction, but the imprecise terms “bad” and “economic situation” don’t provide you with a focus clear enough to distinguish significant detail in your evidence. Without significant detail to analyze, you can’t develop your thesis, either by showing readers what the thesis is good for (what it allows us to understand and explain) or by clarifying its terms.

A writer’s thesis is usually fuzzier in a paper’s opening than it is in the conclusion. As we argue in our critique of five-paragraph form, a paper ending with a claim worded almost exactly as it is in the beginning has not made its thesis adequately responsive to evidence. The body of the paper should not only substantiate the thesis by demonstrating its value in selecting and explaining evidence, but also bring the opening version of the thesis into better focus.

Procedure for Making the Thesis Evolve Through Successive Complications

This section of the chapter presents an extended example that illustrates how the initial formulation of a thesis might evolve—through a series of complications—over the course of a draft.

The procedure for evolving a thesis can be described in the following steps:

- 1. Formulate an idea about your subject.**
This *working thesis* should be some claim about the meaning of your evidence that is good enough to get you started.
- 2. See how far you can make this thesis go in accounting for evidence.**
Use the thesis to explain as much of your evidence as it reasonably can. Try it on. This initial application of thesis to evidence will already begin the process of pressing you to develop your thesis—to ponder the accuracy of key terms, and so forth.
- 3. Locate evidence that is not adequately accounted for by the thesis.**
You will need to look actively for such evidence because the initial version of the thesis will incline you to see only what fits and not to notice the evidence that doesn’t fit.
- 4. Ask “So what?” about the apparent mismatch between the thesis and selected evidence.**
Explain how and why some pieces of evidence do not fit the thesis.
- 5. Reshape your claim to accommodate the evidence that hasn’t fit.**
This will mean rethinking (and rewording) your thesis to resolve or explain apparent contradictions or the way your thesis first led you to see the evidence. Perhaps you will discover that what seemed to be contradictory in the evidence actually isn’t. If the contradiction cannot be resolved, it will put pressure on you to evolve your claim.

6. Repeat steps 2, 3, 4, and 5 several times.
Repeat these steps until you are satisfied that the thesis statement accounts for your evidence as fully and accurately as possible. This is to say that the procedure for making a thesis evolve is *recursive*: it requires you to go over the same ground repeatedly, formulating successive versions of the thesis that are increasingly accurate in wording and idea.

As an overarching guideline, acknowledge the questions that each new formulation of the thesis prompts you to ask. Keep asking “So what?” relentlessly of each new formulation. Remember that the thesis develops through successive complications. Allowing your thesis to run up against potentially conflicting evidence (“But what about this?”) enables you to build upon your initial idea, extending the range of evidence it can accurately account for by clarifying and qualifying its key terms.

Let’s consider the stages you might go through within a more finished draft to evolve a thesis about a film. In *Educating Rita*, a working-class English hairdresser (Rita) wants to change her life by taking courses from a professor (Frank) at the local university, even though this move threatens her relationship with her husband (Denny), who burns her books and puts pressure on her to quit school and get pregnant. Frank, she discovers, has his own problems: he’s a divorced alcoholic who is bored with his life, bored with his privileged and complacent students, and bent on self-destruction. The

film follows the growth of Frank and Rita's friendship and the changes it brings about in their lives. By the end of the film, each has left a limiting way of life behind and has set off in a seemingly more promising direction. She leaves her constricting marriage, passes her university examinations with honors, and begins to view her life in terms of choices; he stops drinking and sets off, determined but sad, to make a new start as a teacher in Australia.

Formulate an idea about your subject (step 1)

Working thesis: *Educating Rita* celebrates the liberating potential of education.

The film's relatively happy ending and the presence of the word "educating" in the film's title make this thesis a reasonable opening claim.

See how far you can make this thesis go in accounting for evidence (step 2) The working thesis seems compatible, for example, with Rita's achievement of greater self-awareness and independence. You would go on to locate more data like this that would support the idea that education is potentially liberating. She becomes more articulate, allowing her to free herself from otherwise disabling situations. She starts to think about other kinds of work she might do, rather than assuming that she must continue in the one job she has always done. She travels, first elsewhere in England and then to the Continent. So, the thesis checks out as viable: there is enough of a match with evidence to make it worth pursuing.

Locate evidence that is not adequately accounted for by the thesis and ask "So what?" about the apparent mismatch between the thesis and selected evidence (steps 3 and 4) Other evidence troubles the adequacy of the working thesis, however: Rita's education causes her to become alienated from her husband, her parents, and her social class; at the end of the film she is alone and unsure about her direction in life. In Frank's case, the thesis runs into even more problems. His boredom, drinking, and alienation seem to have been caused, at least in part, by his education rather than by his lack of it. He sees his book-lined study as a prison. Moreover, his profound knowledge of literature has not helped him to control his life: he comes to class drunk, fails to notice or care that his girlfriend is having an affair with one of his colleagues, and asks his classes whether it is worth gaining all of literature if it means losing one's soul.

Reshape your claim to accommodate the evidence that hasn't fit (step 5)

Question: What are you to do? You cannot convincingly argue that the film celebrates the liberating potential of education, since that thesis ignores such a significant amount of the evidence. Nor can you "switch sides" and argue that the film attacks education as life-denying and disabling, because this thesis is also only partially true.

What not to do. Faced with evidence that complicates your thesis, you should not assume that it is worthless and that you need to start over from scratch. View the "problem" you have discovered as an opportunity to modify your thesis rather than abandon it. After all, the thesis still fits a lot of significant evidence. Rita is arguably better off at the end of the film than at the beginning: we are not left to believe that she should

have remained resistant to education, like her husband Denny, whose world doesn't extend much beyond the corner pub.

What to do. Make apparent complications—the film's seemingly contradictory attitudes about education—explicit, and then modify the wording of your thesis in a way that might resolve or explain these contradictions. You might, for example, be able to resolve an apparent contradiction between your initial thesis (the film celebrates the liberating potential of education) and the evidence by proposing that there is more than one version of education depicted in the film. You would, in short, start qualifying and clarifying the meaning of key terms in your thesis.

In this case, you could divide education as represented by the film into two kinds, enabling and stultifying. Then, the next step in the development of your thesis would be to elaborate on how the film seeks to distinguish true and enabling forms of education from false and debilitating ones (as represented by the self-satisfied and status-conscious behavior of the supposedly educated people at Frank's university).

Revised thesis: *Educating Rita* celebrates the liberating potential of enabling—in contrast to stultifying—education.

Repeat steps 2, 3, 4, and 4 (step 6) Having refined your thesis in this way, you would then repeat the step of seeing what the new wording allows you to account for in your evidence. The revised thesis might, for example, explain Frank's problems as being less a product of his education than of the cynical and pretentious versions of education that surround him in his university life. You could posit further that, with Rita as inspiration, Frank rediscovers at least some of his idealism about education.

What about Frank's emigration to Australia? If we can take Australia to stand for a newer world, one where education would be less likely to become the stale and exclusive property of a self-satisfied elite, then the refined version of the thesis would seem to be working well. In fact, given the possible thematic connection between Rita's working-class identity and Australia (associated, as a former frontier and English penal colony, with lower-class vitality as opposed to the complacency bred of class privilege), the thesis about the film's celebration of the contrast between enabling and stultifying forms of education could be sharpened further. You might propose, for example, that the film presents institutional education as desperately in need of frequent doses of "real life" (as represented by Rita and Australia)—infusions of working-class pragmatism, energy, and optimism—if it is to remain healthy and open, as opposed to becoming the oppressive property of a privileged social class. This is to say that the film arguably exploits stereotypical assumptions about social class.

Revised thesis: *Educating Rita* celebrates the liberating potential of enabling education, defined as that which remains open to healthy doses of working-class, real-world infusions.

Similarly, you can make your supporting ideas (those on which your thesis depends) more accurate and less susceptible to oversimplification, by seeking evidence that might challenge their key terms. *Sharpening the language of your supporting assertions will help you develop your thesis.*

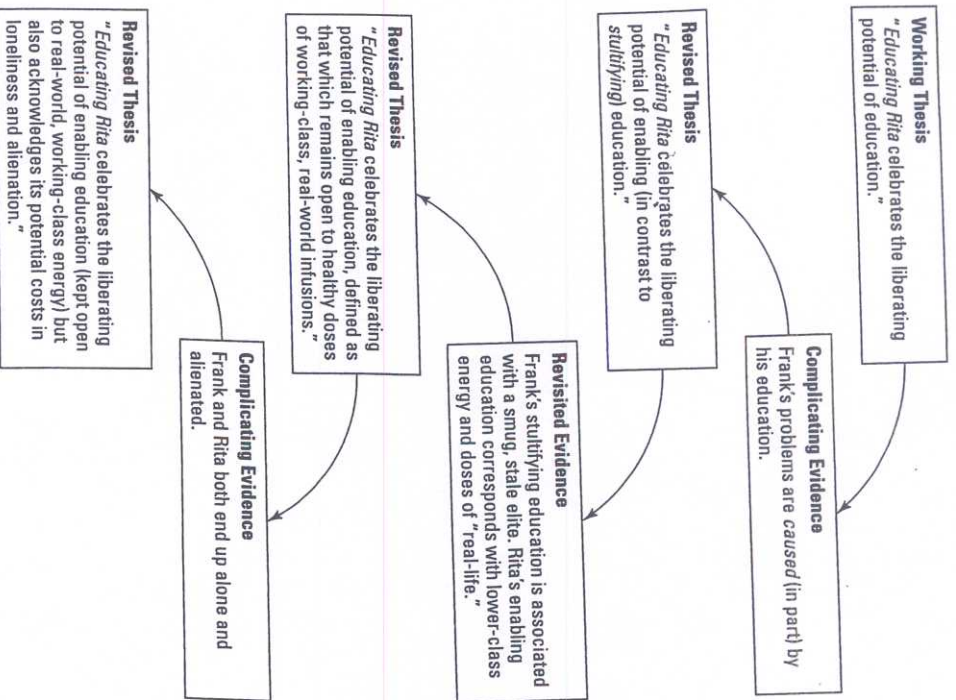


FIGURE 6.3
Successive Revisions of a Thesis. An initial thesis about *Educating Rita* evolves through successive complications as it reexamines evidence in the film.

Consider, for example, the wording of the supporting idea that *Educating Rita* has a happy ending. Some qualification of this idea through consideration of possibly conflicting evidence could produce an adjustment in the first part of the working thesis, that the film celebrates education and presents it as liberating. At the end of the film, Frank and Rita walk off in opposite directions down long, empty airport corridors. Though promising to remain friends, the two do not become a couple. This closing emphasis on Frank's and Rita's alienation from their respective cultures, and the film's

apparent insistence on the necessity of each going on alone, significantly qualifies the happiness of the "happy ending."

Once you have complicated your interpretation of the ending, you will again need to modify your thesis in accord with your new observations. Does the film simply celebrate education if it also presents it as being, to some degree, incompatible with conventional forms of happiness? By emphasizing the necessity of having Frank and Rita each go on alone, the film may be suggesting that in order to be truly liberating, education—as opposed to its less honest and more comfortable substitutes—inevitably produces and even requires a certain amount of loneliness and alienation. Shown in Figure 6.3 are the successive revisions of the thesis.

Final version of thesis: *Educating Rita* celebrates the liberating potential of enabling education (kept open to real-world, working-class energy) but also acknowledges its potential costs in loneliness and alienation.

***Try this:** Using a highlighter, find and track the evolutions of the thesis in a piece of reading, perhaps one for a course and preferably an essay or article rather than an excerpt from a textbook. This exercise will improve your handling of a thesis in your own writing by training you to become more aware of how the thesis operates in material you read. □

B. LOCATING THE EVOLVING THESIS IN THE FINAL DRAFT

An evolving thesis not only stimulates analytical thinking but provides a form. Having achieved a final version of a thesis, such as the one above, *what next?* How and where do you locate the fully evolved thesis in the final draft? Why, for example, wouldn't a writer just offer this last statement of the thesis in his or her first paragraph and then prove it?

One answer to this last question has to do with the reader. The position articulated in the fully evolved thesis is in most cases too complex and too dependent on the various considerations that preceded it to be stated intelligibly and concisely in the introduction. By the time you get to drafting the final, or close-to-final, version of the essay, you will be writing with a reasonably secure sense of how you will conclude, but even then it is not always possible or desirable to try to encapsulate in a paper's first couple of sentences what it will actually take the whole paper to explain.

Another answer has to do with the writer: writing is a matter not just of communicating with and persuading readers but of communicating with and persuading yourself. The evolution of a thesis involves the discovery of new ways of thinking brought about by successive confrontations with evidence. *The history of your various changes in thinking is what the evolving thesis records (and in some cases, it's the essay itself).*

A full answer to the questions of where to locate the fully evolved thesis in a final draft and how much of its evolution to include involves two separate but related issues: (1) the location of the thesis statement in relation to the conventional shapes of argument—induction and deduction—and (2) the customary location of the thesis according to the protocols (ways of proceeding) of different disciplines.