

THE DEBATABLE THESIS



Assignment: In 3-5 pages, compare and contrast the reasons why the North and South fought the Civil War. Your paper must include a *debatable thesis statement* that you support with examples from the texts we've read in class.

Unpack it!

What exactly is a “thesis statement?”

- A thesis statement tells the reader of your paper how you will interpret the subject matter under discussion. Such a statement is sometimes called an *argument*, a *main idea*, or a *controlling idea*. If your assignment asks you to *analyze*, to *interpret*, to *compare and contrast*, to *demonstrate cause and effect*, or to *take a stand* on an issue, you are being asked to develop a thesis.

What makes a thesis statement “debatable?”

- A thesis is an *interpretation* of a subject, not the subject itself. In this case, the subject of the assignment is the Civil War. As an interpretation of the Civil War, your thesis must offer a way to understand the war that others might dispute. If your thesis is something that is generally agreed upon or accepted as fact then there is no reason to try to persuade people. A good debatable thesis does not simply summarize, but *makes an argument*.

Why is a debatable thesis so important?

- A strong thesis indicates that you are *thinking critically* about the subject matter, not just repeating information you've heard or read. Your professor doesn't want to read 3-5 pages of factual information about the Civil War. She/he wants to know that you can connect facts in a way that creates meaning or significance.

Do it!

You might start with:

The North and South fought the Civil War for many reasons, some of which were the same and some different.

So what? This is a pretty weak thesis statement. It only restates the question, fails to provide further information, and doesn't make any kind of an argument. Let's try this:

While both sides fought the Civil War over the issue of slavery, the North fought for moral reasons while the South fought to preserve its own institutions.

Good. This is what we might call a *working thesis*. But let's make it stronger:

While both the North and the South believed they fought against tyranny and oppression, Northerners focused on the oppression of slaves while Southerners defended their rights to property and self-government.

Great! This is a strong thesis statement because it interprets evidence and makes a conclusion. It also provides the structure for the rest of your essay. Your first body paragraph might show how the North and South both believed they fought against tyranny and oppression—this is the *compare* part of the original assignment. The remaining paragraphs might then move into the *contrast* part of the assignment, and show how the North and South interpreted tyranny and oppression differently.

Test it!

In order to determine whether or not your thesis is a strong, debatable argument, ask yourself the following questions:

- *Does my thesis answer the question?* Go back to the assignment and make sure your thesis responds to it.
- *Does my thesis take a position that others might challenge, oppose, or dispute?* If not, your thesis is probably weak, and you need to take a position or be more specific. If you can write down a thesis statement directly opposing your own, you have successfully crafted a debatable thesis.
- *So what?* If “So what?” is your professor’s first response, you probably have a weak, uninteresting thesis that doesn’t argue for or against anything. You need to clarify and make a connection to a bigger issue.

Sources:

University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Writing Center
<http://www.unc.edu/depts/wcweb/handouts/thesis.html>

The OWL at Purdue
<http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/588/01/>