

Thesis: your main insight or idea about a text or topic, and the *main* proposition that your essay demonstrates. It should be true but arguable (not obviously or patently true, but one alternative among several), be limited enough in scope to be argued in a short composition and with available evidence, and get to the heart of the text or topic being analyzed (not be peripheral). It should be stated early in some form and at some point recast sharply (not just be implied), and it should govern the whole essay (not disappear in places).

Structure: the sequence of main sections or sub-topics, and the turning points between them. The sections should follow a logical order, and the links in that order should be apparent to the reader. But it should also be a progressive order—there should have a direction of *development* or *complication*, not be simply a list or a series of restatements of the thesis (“Macbeth is ambitious: he’s ambitious *here*; and he’s ambitious *here*; and he’s ambitions *here*, too; thus, Macbeth is ambitious”). And the order should be supple enough to allow the writer to explore the topic, not just hammer home a thesis. (If the essay is complex or long, its structure may be briefly announced or hinted at after the thesis, in a road-map or plan sentence.)

—Gordon Harvey, “Elements of the Academic Essay”

Hamlet: “’Tis now the very witching time of night” (III.ii.351ff.)

Thesis 1: In a *Macbeth*-like soliloquy delivered by Hamlet in Act III, Shakespeare displays a great example of his profound mastery of the English language and shows why not even short passages of his greatest play, *Hamlet*, should be cut in production. Truly, Shakespeare is the greatest writer of all time.

Thesis 2: Hamlet’s soliloquy suggests as no other passage does that he has not fallen into lunacy of an earthly sort but rather is clearly possessed by the devil, just as Horatio feared would happen when Hamlet spoke to the Ghost in Act I.

The Lead Player: “’The rugged Pyrrhus’ ” (II.ii.413ff.)

Thesis 3: Many directors fail to appreciate that the Player’s speech reveals an interplay between emotion and action, shapes Hamlet’s analysis of his own tragedy, and directs his revenge against the King.

Claudius: “O, my offence is rank, it smells to heaven” (III.iii.36ff.)

Thesis 4: As we reach the end of the soliloquy, we realize that the King is not asking his God to forgive him but is praying for the desire to repent.

Thesis 5: Why waste so much time with this speech. So what if it shows some remorse and indecision in Claudius’s character. This scene really isn’t necessary, one might think. However, it is extremely necessary. It’s not that it shows remorse (which it actually doesn’t), but that it shows Claudius acting remorseful. This scene reveals that Claudius’s character is only two-dimensional.

Dr. Kerry Walk <kwalk@princeton.edu>

Thesis 6: In his soliloquy, Claudius reveals an inner duel between his rational desire to act virtuously and his impulsive gravitation toward material gain and selfishness.

Thesis 7: For all that it shows about Claudius, the speech actually holds the key to an understanding of Hamlet and his dilemma. Illuminating the similarities between the “villain” and the “hero,” the prayer speech casts such doubt on Hamlet’s virtuous imperative that it inverts the two characters’ moral positions.

Dr. Kerry Walk <kwalk@princeton.edu>

These on *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*

Thesis 1: If a child grows up without his mother, he may lose his devotion for her, as did Douglass, but she will perpetually care and worry about her child.

Thesis 2: The description of Douglass's aunt's beating is the most important part of the first chapter. It is the major turning point in his life, it leaves a deep impression on him, and it convinces readers of the evils of slavery.

Thesis 3: Looking at Douglass's discussion of his heritage, we must explore what point Douglass is attempting to make about his racial identification. What makes him discredit this rumor when he so clearly wants a foundation and an identity?

Thesis 4: Douglass does not condemn white people in his narrative, but rather the institution of slavery itself.

Thesis 5: But through his choice of genre, Douglass can *show* rather than *tell* why slavery has to be abolished.... His choices of structure and vocabulary, and the hidden implications of his statements, allow Douglass to sneak deep into his reader's conscience (and hold abolitionists to *his* truths) without, on the surface, calling attention to any provocative argument against slavery.