REVISING THESIS STATEMENTS

It's normal for your first attempts at making a debatable claim to be a bit rough. A thesis statement that needs more work is often one that:

- Makes no debatable claim, such as *This paper will examine the pros and cons of death.*

- Is too vague, or relies on folk wisdom as its claim, such as *A positive attitude will help you succeed.*

- Is too broad, such as *Sex sells.*

- Is obvious, or a statement of fact, such as *Death is very scary to some people.*

If you suspect your thesis could be stronger or more focused, think about playing bad cop and bringing it in to the station downtown for questioning. Grilling your thesis can be done before you start your first draft or when revising a later draft—any time you want to make sure the thesis is saying something that makes for a useful argument, and is what you really mean.

To start this process, first ask questions that rule out the above weaknesses. Then try asking it *who? what? when? where? why?* or *how?* questions that seek clarification. For example:

THESIS: The media is very influential in today's society.

YOU: That's an obvious statement or fact—shouldn't you be debatable, Thesis? Is there even an opposing viewpoint to that?

THESIS: Uh, the media is not very influential in today's society?

YOU: That's ridiculous. No one would argue that. You're wasting my time here. What do you mean by "society"? By "the media"?

THESIS: Teenagers are greatly influenced by television programming.

YOU: How are they influenced? Where? When? This will all go easier if you just tell me.

THESIS: Okay, okay, um: Modern American teens are

greatly influenced in their dress, language, and attitudes by television programming.

YOU: Why? WHY?!

THESIS: I don't know, man. Maybe it's because American teens are particularly peer conscious and therefore are more likely to be influenced by advertising during television programming than other demographics are.

YOU: Okay. Now we're getting somewhere.

At a certain point, you'll want to really give your thesis a hard time and ask it questions like: "Oh yeah, well what about...?" And, of course, the classic: "So what?" Then your thesis really starts to shape up.

THESIS: Despite the prevalent iconography of the rebellious adolescent, American teens are increasingly influenced by television advertising and are becoming more culturally homogenous than ever before.

A strong thesis statement can incorporate and embrace contradictions or opposing viewpoints. (That's why thesis

statements often include the words "however" or "although.") If in the course of reading, researching, or writing, you encounter conflicting evidence or interpretations, don't immediately abandon your thesis. Take advantage of those complications to expand, qualify, and refine your thesis until you find the most accurate explanation of the evidence you can manage.

When you've finished this interrogation, you'll also have a useful byproduct: a list of questions you can use to make sure you have good definitions, evidence, and source material to back up your assertions.

PRACTICE: Using the model of the thesis interrogation in this chapter, ask *who? what? when? where? why? how?* and *so what?* questions of your thesis (or of a classmate's). Then rewrite your thesis so that it addresses the questions, and use the list at the beginning of REVISING THESIS STATEMENTS (on page 65) to test your new thesis.

WRITING THESIS STATEMENTS

The thesis statement goes by many names: central point, assertion, or argument, to name a few. Often one or two sentences long, a thesis statement usually appears near the beginning of an essay, and many college teachers expect that it will appear at the end of your first paragraph. It usually consists of two parts: the *topic* and the *assertion or argument* you intend to make about the topic in your paper. For example:

> "Although often portrayed as the quintessential vampire in literature and movies, Dracula [topic] was not the first, nor the most significant vampire [assertion]."

Your thesis needs to be debatable, a position that can be supported or proven with logic and evidence. Don't let the thought of having to "prove" something fluster you, though—you just need to make a solid case.

Some ways to get started include:

- Write a list of questions you might ask about your topic, and circle the one that you care most about that fits the assignment. Next, write a list of more questions related to that question. Looking at those questions, create a theory that *answers* one or more of them. That theory, as crazy as it sounds, might be your thesis.

- Look for a paradox, contradiction, or problem related to your topic. Write your thesis so that it points out this complication.

- You might try fitting your information into a structure like this: "Although at first it seems _____, upon closer inspection it is clear that _____."

Sometimes you don't really know what you're writing about—or your thoughts and feelings on it—until you've written a few pages. Learning about something by writing about it is normal, so there's no reason to worry if your original thesis statement seems imperfect or less accurate as you write more of your paper. That original thesis statement has simply turned out to be a "working thesis" that has helped you charge ahead and get a draft written.

If by the end of the paper your working thesis doesn't turn out to be what you feel anymore, that's fine. For most writers,

trying to carefully produce five "perfect" pages in one draft is far more painful than writing a draft with a working thesis, and then going back to revise.

Revising your working thesis into a stronger statement will probably require you to do some revision within the body of your draft, as well. Those kinds of changes are good—they indicate that you're narrowing in on exactly what you're arguing, and you're adjusting your paper to prove that argument. The important thing is that you shouldn't be married to your first thoughts on a topic—you "work on" your paper as you write it. That's why it's called a working thesis.

PRACTICE: Write the opposite of your thesis. If that's difficult, is your current thesis too general? Then write three versions of your working thesis. Try at least one using one of the following words: *although, however, because,* or *despite.* Share your three versions with your peers and ask them to test each one: Does your thesis include a topic and an assertion about the topic? Is it debatable? Does it promise to explore or explain a paradox, a contradiction, or a problem?