

Theses Pieces: Making Sweet Historical Arguments

Many people, wrote the British historian Arnold J. Toynbee, think that history is just “one damned thing after another.” Don’t be one of these chumps. Make sure that your history essays are centered around an argument. This handout will explain how to craft strong historical arguments and why this form of argumentation is central to the study of the past.

Historical Questions

As Toynbee appreciated, historians don’t just recount the past—they seek to explain it. To do this, historians ask questions about their topic. These queries aim to deepen and expand our understanding of the subject rather than just inform us about it. Historical questions often address issues such as cause and effect, motives, or meaning. They are specific (in terms of time, place, and subject) but still open ended (in that they do not have a yes or no answer). Above all else, they are *argumentative*, meaning that they can legitimately be answered in multiple ways.

Compare the following set of questions:

Example One: Who were the key members of the American Whig Party and when did it dissolve?

Example Two: Why did the American Whig Party dissolve?

A thorough answer to the first question, even if well organized and well written, will likely amount to little more than a list of facts. And let’s be honest: lists of facts are boring. They’re devoid of critical thinking. A good answer to the second question, on the other hand, will necessarily tackle issues of causation, such as increased hat sales. Answering the second question will be more difficult, but it will showcase the author’s analytical skills, lead to more interesting historical debates, and enrich our understanding of the past.

Here are a few more examples of solid, open-ended questions:

- How was Britain able to maintain control over its global empire throughout the nineteenth century?
- What were the major factors leading to the French Revolution?
- Why did Britney Spears become an enduring cultural icon in the early twenty-first century?

From Historical Questions to Thesis Statements

Now that you have a question, it’s time to answer it. Just like a lawyer constructing a case for court, historians must present to their readers coherent, compelling arguments based on the best available evidence and sharpest possible reasoning. The thesis statement outlines what the author wants to prove. It is the first step in persuading readers that you have a good answer to the question at hand.

Observations: Avoid These in Your Theses

An observation is not a thesis statement. To identify whether or not a sentence is merely an observation, ask yourself whether or not a reasonable person could disagree with the statement. Here are some examples of observations:

- The British were the major naval power in the nineteenth century.
- Historians disagree about the causes of the French Revolution.
- Britney Spears became a pop singer in the 1990s.

Weak Thesis Statements

Some thesis statements *do* assert claims but fail to address their claims' validity. This leaves readers to wonder "How?" and "Why?" Your job as a writer is to clearly and directly answer these questions in your thesis statement. The following are examples of weak thesis statements:

- A dominant navy allowed the British to effectively control foreign territories.
- The origins of the French Revolution cannot be reduced to a single cause.
- Britney Spears' cultural influence has long been overlooked by historians.

Strong Thesis Statements

To strengthen your thesis, make sure that it not only states your claim but also provides a persuasive explanation for that claim. In other words, the *writer* answers the how and why question here, not the reader. Listed below are some strong thesis statements:

- The British Empire's ability to disrupt trade, move troops, and distribute resources with its navy allowed them to control foreign territories.
- Heightened political awareness, fueled by decades-long inequities in the French political system, transformed a mundane food shortage riot into the French Revolution.
- Due to their privileging of high culture over pop culture, historians have overlooked the cultural significance of Britney Spears in the late 1990s and early 2000s, missing a crucial voice in the development of middle-class white femininity.

Of course, a thesis statement does not prove your argument. Your evidence and analysis, combined with your writing's eloquence, will help persuade readers. But a strong thesis statement will make for a more compelling essay and, as Toynbee advised, demonstrate that history is more than just "one damned thing after another." Debate that.