

The Three-Story Thesis

There are one-story intellects, two-story intellects, and three-story intellects with skylights. All fact collectors who have no aim beyond their facts are one-story men. Two-story men compare, reason, generalize, using the labor of fact collectors as their own. Three-story men idealize, imagine, predict—their best illumination comes from above the skylight.

—Oliver Wendell Holmes (1841-1935)

Holmes' idea about kinds of intellect is easily transferable to the problem of creating interesting and analytically powerful theses. This is the kind of thesis I expect to see you using in your remaining essay.

One-Story Thesis

The one-story thesis demonstrates your ability to collect and report facts. Usually a paper with a one-story thesis simply requires you to stitch together a bunch of summaries. While this kind of thesis might be appropriate for some essay exams, it isn't adequate for college-level writing. It is like a cup of instant coffee—yes, it has caffeine, so on one level it gets the job done, but it doesn't taste that great.

One-story theses tend to be “what” questions: they tell you what a text is about, but no more. They only approach a text's surface or skin.

- *Walden* is a book about a man escaping from society into nature.
 - o A paragraph about “society” and conformism.
 - o A paragraph about “nature” and nonconformism.
 - o Etc.
- The character of Jim in *Huckleberry Finn* is a racist caricature.
 - o A paragraph about Jim's superstitions.
 - o A paragraph about Jim's dialect.
 - o Etc.

A paper with a one-story thesis will likely receive a grade of B- or lower.

Two-Story Thesis

Unlike the one-story thesis, which simply requires one to collect and report the facts, a two-story thesis demands some analysis of those facts. With this kind of a thesis the writer examines how the facts work in relation to one another and what the implication of those connections are. Rather than a simple reporter, the writer becomes more active: she analyzes, makes inferences, classifies, delineates a process, establishes cause and effect, etc. A two-story thesis is like a good cup of French roast—nothing fancy, but is substantial and tastes good.

Two-story theses tend to be “how” questions: how does Thoreau argue for his point of view, or how does Twain tell us about the racist atmosphere that Huck was born into. They go beneath the surface of the text to examine its bones and muscles.

- In *Walden*, Thoreau seeks to live more authentically by building a cabin in the woods and making himself as independent from Concord society as he can.
 - o A paragraph defining the relationship between authenticity and nature.
 - o A paragraph about the connection between authenticity and independence.
 - o Etc.
- The character of Jim in *Huckleberry Finn* is consistently depicted in a racist way, and Huck’s treatment of him is fundamentally racist as well.
 - o A paragraph about Huck’s failures to protect Jim from others’ racism.
 - o A paragraph about Huck’s acceptance of his community’s moral standards.
 - o Etc.

A paper with a two-story thesis will receive a grade of B+ or lower.

Three-Story Thesis

Writers of the three-story thesis take risks—they are willing to widen the scope of their papers and contexts in order to create a broader and more complex discussion. As the skylight metaphor suggests, three-story theses are open to the world outside. Three-story theses often create a tension by setting parts of their argument in opposition to one another, rather than trying to make everything “neat” by eliminating complexities and contradictions. When tension is present in a thesis, one often finds the conjunctions “although” or “even if.” The writer’s job is to navigate between opposites. A thesis with tension interests a reader—he or she senses the tension and wants to know what happens and why. A three-story thesis is like an almond latte with whipped crème—tastes good, with different parts complimenting one another tastefully . . . and it packs a wallop!

Three-story theses are “why” questions: they explore the “what” and “how” of a text so as to probe meanings invisible to the naked eye. Not only do they get under the skin of a text, but they observe it in its particular historical situation.

- Although Thoreau builds his cabin in the woods in order “to live deliberately” and separately from society, he finds that he has brought Concord and its values with him.
 - o A paragraph presenting the conventional take on *Walden*, using evidence from the early chapters to show how he separates himself from society.
 - o A paragraph that complicates the argument by introducing evidence of Thoreau’s engagement with society.
 - o Etc.
- Huck learns to accept Jim as an equal, yet the fact that Jim is not in fact his equal but is really Huck’s superior complicates the novel’s anti-racist arguments.
 - o A paragraph showing how Huck comes to accept Jim as his equal.
 - o A paragraph examining evidence of Jim’s being more adult, more intelligent, and/or more moral than Huck.

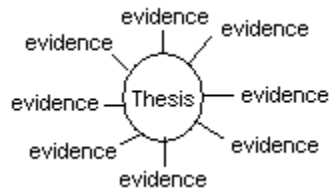
- Etc.

A paper with a three-story thesis has a shot at the A.

On Structure

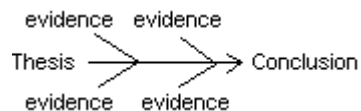
What to Avoid: The Hub-and-Spoke

A hub-and-spoke argument begins with a single, often simplistic idea (for example, “Thoreau is the ultimate individualist”) and then has a number of paragraphs, each of which presents evidence pointing to the general applicability of that idea (he goes off to live by himself, he seems to prefer nature to people, etc.). The trouble is that you will end up with a bunch of paragraphs that all relate to the central idea, but that don’t relate to each other; they literally won’t add up, as in the diagram below:



What to Adopt: The Accumulative Argument

Instead of the hub-and-spoke model, you need to produce an *accumulative argument*: an argument that builds *from* evidence rather than *to* it, as in the second diagram:



This model will produce an organically unified argument, rather than one constructed from shreds and patches; it will also help you to generate a thesis that is neither overly general nor implausible. This is an especially useful way to think about first drafts: start by investigating one of the text’s rhetorical or textual elements and pursue your investigation from there. Form a hypothesis and see what evidence from the text supports or complicates that hypothesis. Go back and change your thesis again and again until it’s reached three-story status. Then present the evidence that supports each story (the *what*, the *how*, and the *why*).

How To Argue

An argument tests a proposition or idea. By asserting a premise and then trying to ground that premise in the text, you can induce strong interpretations or deduce brilliant conclusions. Argument can be in dialogue with other writers, with the text’s content and form, or with your

own original propositions (counter-argument). The key to argumentation is to construct clear and logical statements, and to present them in an ordered fashion.

The table below charts the basic vocabulary of argument.

Argument Indicators:	Premise Indicators:	Conclusion Indicators:
should	since	therefore
must	because	hence
ought	for	thus
necessarily	as	so
although	in as much as	consequently
	for the reason that	it follows that
	first	one may infer
		one may conclude

Example:

Although Uncle Tom is presented as the hero of Stowe's novel, he is less a hero than a Christian martyr whose suffering serves as a necessary counterweight to the more conventionally heroic struggles of other black characters like George Harris. As Tom through his martyrdom "saves" the slaves who have beaten him to death, so does he save the novel as a whole from terrifying its readers with images of militant blacks.

Argument/Idea: Tom's Christian martyrdom "saves" the violent black characters who beat him.

Premise/Claim: His patient suffering refocuses attention that might instead focus on the violent struggle of George Harris.

Conclusion/ Interpretation: Therefore his suffering saves the novel from being too frightening or disturbing to its white readers.

***Things to Ask Yourself about Your Argument:**

- Do I understand what I am arguing for or against?
- Does my argument have evidence to support it?
- Are my arguments orderly and developed?
- Are my sentences and premises clear?
- Does my argument open new possibilities or interpretations?
- Is there another conclusion to my argument that I may want to explore as well?