



## The Three-Point Test

An excellent way to expand ideas is to complicate the thesis because the shape and size of the thesis generally determines the shape and size of an essay.

When students fail to meet a minimal page length requirement they usually try to add more material in the body of an essay. But if the thesis stays the same, that new material is either repetitive – because the thesis has already been proven – or tangential – because everything needed to prove the thesis has already been said. The best way to lengthen an essay, therefore, is to alter its thesis by adding an additional clause or concept. Doing so then naturally opens up space for more material by reframing the argument.

### Point One – An Arguable Thesis

An arguable thesis can be disputed by a reasonable reader, so "The United States has a complex political history" is not arguable because most people would agree (even if not on the specifics), and "The United States is comprised of 50 states and 16 territories" is not arguable because all reasonable people would agree.

An arguable thesis strikes a balance that allows the writer to (a) reinforce, with logic and evidence, the views of readers who agree; (b) give undecided readers a reason to consider the argument; and (c) enable readers who disagree to reframe their views.

### Point Two – A Supportable Thesis

A supportable thesis can be bolstered with logic and evidence. While an unarguable thesis makes an overly obvious or agreed-upon statement, an unsupported thesis makes a statement by which almost no one could be convinced. Negotiating argument – the thesis breaks new ground in some way – and support – the thesis' newness is not so far-fetched as to be unbelievable – is the aim of every good argument.

### Point Three – A Complex Thesis

A complex thesis does more than list three items that can be explored in one paragraph each and aims towards nuance of understanding, some sense of significance or causation, or a subtlety of approach that can incorporate multiple angles. Complexity can mean finding the gray areas in a concept rather than arguing for black and white answers. It can mean questioning an entire premise or looking at something from a new



angle. This quality, as the most elusive of the three and clearly the most subjective, can constantly be changed and improved.

## Explaining Complexity

Students grasp and evaluate the concepts of arguable and supportable theses rather quickly, but arguments lacking complexity need more intricate solutions.

Begin by exploring gray areas, specificity, and nuance. If students are writing about gun control, for instance, they might immediately jump to “pro” or “con” perspectives, but their essays will be richer and more meaningful if they (a) narrow down the topic to make it more specific; (b) feel comfortable finding interim arguments that aren’t fully pro or con; and (c) explore subtleties within the larger issue.

A student who begins by arguing that “Gun control is good for America because it will save lives, lessen class distinctions, and increase communal unity” has a thesis that is both arguable and supportable. But it is not particularly complex. Encourage this student to be more specific: he could focus on particular weapons or weapon accessories, or he could explore what he means by “control.” Closing loopholes? Creating federal rather than state legislation? Engaging in more robust buy-back programs? Once he narrows his choices, he can create interim arguments between “yes” and “no,” which will give him more material and a clearer direction for his argument.