

What is a Thesis in Literary Criticism?

- In literary criticism a **thesis** is a statement about the characteristic feature(s) of a literary text (form, theme, “message”) that is the **basis for an argument**.
- A thesis should **not be too general**: “Howl is a poem about the beat generation” is not a good thesis because it is too general and does not make for a good argument.
- A thesis should **not state the obvious**: “Howl is about having sex and taking drugs” is not a good thesis because it states the obvious on a very superficial content level.
- A thesis should **not directly evaluate the text** in a simplistic way: “Howl is a bad poem” is a bad thesis –literary criticism should be more differentiated.
- A thesis **should be precise and lead directly to concrete questions to discuss in the argument**: “Howl shows the beat generation in a desperate search for liberation in post-war America” is a good thesis because it says precisely what the poem (in the opinion of the literary critic) *does* and it leads directly to questions such as: How does the poem show this? Which different levels of “liberation” are meant? Etc.
- A thesis can be the **mainly about the form** (“Howl links itself to the tradition of Walt Whitman because of its use of language and the long line”) **or the theme/content** (“search for liberation”): **The argument always needs to take both form and content/theme into account** (in literature, and maybe especially in poetry, form *is* content)
- **A thesis leads to an argument**: You can argue for and against every thesis. When you make a thesis in literary criticism you want to argue mainly in favor of it, and you want to build a good argument for it. That does not mean that everybody has to agree with it. A thesis is good when it leads to a lively argument/discussion – not necessarily when there are only arguments in favor of it. Literary criticism always deals with theses and arguments, and well-known literary critics are best known to argue with each other about their theses for years and years.
- **Thesis and argument are always connected to the text**: A thesis can never be proven as a physical experiment can prove something. But you can build up proof for your thesis by a convincing argument that supports your thesis. **The support of every thesis is always based on the text**. When you support a thesis with examples from the text, you argue for it. When you contradict a thesis with examples from the text, you argue against it. The quality of argument depends on how well you can support your thesis with examples from the text. **The key to a good thesis and to a good convincing argument is always careful reading**.