

014 Composition 04 - The Writing Process: Drafting: Thesis Statements

What is a Thesis?

A thesis statement is a *single, clear, direct statement of the main idea of an essay*. It prepares the readers for the ideas and supporting details that follow and provides structure for the writing, enabling the writer to produce a coherent and organized essay. The thesis statement also restricts the writer, limiting the scope of the discussion in the paper. This helps keep the essay focused and on topic.

Coming up with a good, clear thesis statement is the first step in planning and organizing ANY piece of writing; developing and exploring that thesis is the purpose of all academic writing.



Different kinds of essays, such as narratives, comparison-contrast essays, arguments, and analytical essays, require different kinds of thesis statements—they say different kinds of things and are organized differently—but all theses have certain functions and features in common.

A thesis statement for a narrative essay might be something like this:

The eighteen hours I spent trapped in an elevator was one of the most frightening times of my life, and made me truly appreciate my freedom.

While a comparison-contrast thesis might sound like:

While “supply-side” economics focuses on providing tax breaks to those who hold investing power and capital, “demand-side” economics is concerned with generating demand for products at the consumer level.

An argumentative thesis articulates a claim and reasons for that claim:

The University should build more parking for its students because it will make class attendance easier, provide more value for students’ tuition dollars, and improve student safety.

An analytical thesis tries to describe the nature of something in very specific terms:

In Sonnet 73 (see Appendix 1: Readings) Shakespeare uses a series of metaphors of “fading” or “dying” things to show that despite the fact that he is aging and will die, he appreciates that his significant other loves him anyway.

Constructing a Thesis: The Four Ds

The Four Ds are a quick way of talking about some key standards to which all thesis statements—no matter what kind of essay you are writing—should adhere. A thesis statement should:

1. **Be clearly Discernible:** the thesis should be easy to find in the introduction to your paper.
2. **Be Detailed:** the thesis should articulate very specific claims regarding your topic.
3. **Provide Direction:** the thesis establishes a sense of purpose and organization for the paper.
4. **Be Defensible:** the thesis should be one you can back up with evidence and details.

Clearly Discernible



This is probably the easiest of the Four Ds: the thesis should be easy to discern, or identify. A reader should not have to work very hard to find out the main point of your essay. After a brief scan of your essay's introduction, your reader should be able to complete easily the following statement:

“The essay argues that . . .” or “This essay is going to compare X and Y.”

If your reader cannot answer these questions immediately after reading your introduction, there is a problem with the discernibility of your

thesis statement.

To be easy to find, thesis statements in shorter arguments should generally be confined to one sentence. Longer papers (10 pages or more) can have thesis statements that are longer (usually no more than 2 sentences).

Generally speaking, you want to emphasize the thesis in the introduction to your paper, building up to it and highlighting its importance. As such, in most short papers, the thesis should be positioned at the end of the introductory paragraph. This presents the thesis to the reader and directly and clearly draws her attention to it.

Read the essay introduction below and notice how the introduction builds to the thesis statement (in bold), which is clearly discernible.

In the 2016 election for President of the United States, candidates Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton raised—and spent—over a *billion* dollars. This money was raised from many sources, from individuals giving small donations over the internet to organizations called PACs (Political Action Committees), unions, and lobbyists contributing thousands of dollars. It is clear that money drives politics in this country: whomever has more money can usually spend him or herself into office. This needs to change. **Campaign finance law in the United States needs to be reformed to ensure the integrity, transparency, and fairness of the American political system.**

Now read this introduction, and see if you can find the thesis:

For the last 100 years, trans fats, mainly in the form of hydrogenated oils, have been a staple of the western diet. Cheaper and less perishable than animal-based fats like lard and tallow, trans fats are a large part of many processed foods. Cake mixes, oil-based spreads like margarine, canned soups, frozen dinners, and pizza dough all have an extremely high content of trans fat. Unfortunately, these fats are damaging to the human body, causing marked increases in coronary heart disease in all the populations shown to eat a diet high in

them. City, state, and local governments should do their best to make it in the best interests of food manufacturers and restaurants to limit the use of trans fats in their products. In 2004, a study conducted by Rutgers University conclusively linked the elimination of trans fats with an increase in coronary health. Similarly, a 2007 experiment at the University of Texas-El Paso (UTEP) suggested that removing even 50% of the trans fat in one's diet can translate into a longer life expectancy.

This paragraph states its main idea in the middle of the paragraph, where the reader can more likely miss it. Instead of building to a good, easy-to-find thesis, the essay makes the reader guess at the main idea of the essay. The idea might become clearer in subsequent paragraphs, but making a reader work too hard for the information is a hallmark of ineffective or unclear writing.

Where could you move the thesis to improve its discernibility?

Is Adequately Detailed

The thesis should make explicit, specific statements about your topic. Thesis statements that are too broad and lack detail make constructing an essay around them very difficult.

Narrative thesis statements should clearly preview the specific story the essay is trying to tell and link the narrative to a general moral; comparison-contrast theses should outline clear and specific similarities and differences between the things being compared; argument thesis statements should articulate a specific claim and warrants for that claim.

Some very broad thesis statements that do not contain enough detail:

When I was a child I had an amazing experience that made me who I am today.

There are similarities and differences between low-sugar and low-fat foods.

The Transformers was a good movie.

Shakespeare uses metaphors to describe himself in his poems.

Better, narrower, more specific thesis statements with more detail:

When I was a young child, I was able to visit Japan with my parents, which helped me develop a great appreciation for Asian culture.

While both low-sugar and low-fat foods are good for dieting, they also feature different drawbacks, such as high sodium or artificial sweeteners.

The Transformers is an important accomplishment in moviemaking because of its innovations in special effects and set design.

In “Let me not to the marriage of true minds,” Shakespeare uses images of permanent, immortal things to talk about the timeless nature of love.

Provides Direction

The thesis should convey to your audience a sense of your topic's importance, as well as provide an organizational plan for the rest of the paper. Much of this is established by the structure and organization of the thesis itself. *An effective thesis statement should introduce ideas in the order in which they will be discussed in the essay.* This is especially important in comparison and argument essays.

Examples of thesis statements that provide a clear organizational plan:

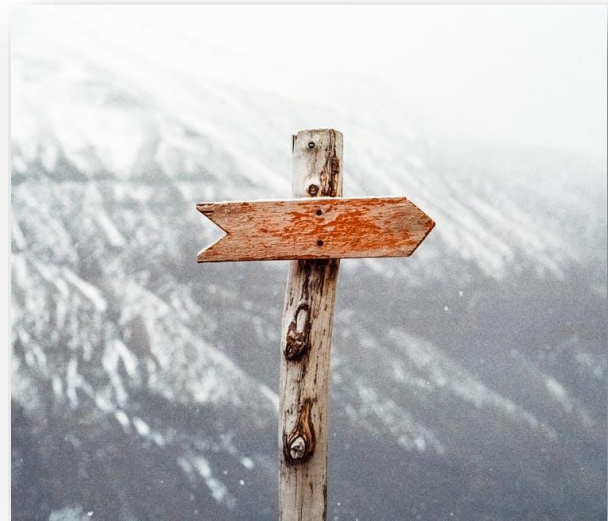
There are four main components to wellness: physical, emotional, social, and psychological.

The Civil War was caused by three major factors: political tension over the power of the federal government over the individual states, economic conflict between industrialism and agrarianism, and of course the moral division over slavery.

Saving Private Ryan revolutionized how filmmakers approach the topic of war because of its graphic depiction of violence and extensive use of hand-held cameras to capture the panic of combat.

While both abstinence-only and full-disclosure sex education programs cover much of the same ground in terms of the information presented, the motivations behind each and their ultimate goals are quite different.

The Transformers is an important achievement in moviemaking because it expanded the possibilities of special effects, it created realistic CGI-based characters, and showed filmmakers new ways of photographing effects-driven movies.



Subsequent paragraphs should develop points brought up in your thesis *in the order in which the thesis states them*.

Topic sentences (the first sentence of a paragraph) should be based on the main points of your thesis statement. For example, topic sentences for the *Transformers* example above might look something like this:

1. *[Body Paragraph 1] The Transformers' innovative use of computer-generated special effects significantly increased the scope of motion picture production capabilities. (Part 1 of thesis)*

2. *[Body Paragraph 2] The Transformers' hyper-realistic CGI characters raised the standard by which all subsequent action movies will be judged. (Part 2 of thesis)*

3. *[Body Paragraph 3] The groundbreaking cinematographic techniques in Transformers, most notably the seamless combination of "real life" footage and green screen footage, will change how sci-fi movies will be filmed.*

For more information on connecting your thesis statement to the body of your paper, see Chapter 05.2 of this text, Organizing a Writing Plan.

Is Clearly Defensible



Your thesis should be one that you can support with details. You should be able to back it up with tangible evidence, comparisons that are logical and intuitive, and narratives that are grounded in fact.

Avoid unsupportable theses. Here are some examples that are difficult, if not impossible, to support with facts and details.

John F. Kennedy, prior to his election to the presidency, was a covert agent for the Soviet KGB.

The film The Ten Commandments will make you a better person.

If we allow junior high students to read Judy Blume's Forever, a trashy novel about a teenager losing her virginity, soon they will be reading Hustler and Playgirl magazines in the classroom.

Barack Hussein Obama is really just a terrorist in disguise; his real goal is to bring down the U.S. government.



Better, more supportable theses—these are ideas for which you can find facts and details to support:

Prior to his election to the Presidency, John F. Kennedy held a number of positions that prepared him to lead the country, including a position in the US Senate.

The films The Ten Commandments and The Last Temptation of Christ both explore religious themes, but they take radically different approaches to doing so and come to very different conclusions.

If we allow junior high students to read Judy Blume's Forever in class, we may be setting a dangerous precedent for the discussion of sexuality in the public schools.

Barack Obama prepared for his post as U.S. president by graduating from Harvard Law School, working as a community organizer, and eventually serving in the U.S. Senate.

Narrative Thesis Statements

Narrative essay thesis statements are often a single-sentence condensation of the substance of the narrative or story being conveyed. Many times, these thesis statements also state (or imply) the purpose of the writing.

In *personal* narratives, narratives that are about something personal that the author has experienced, the thesis usually summarizes the experience and its importance:

The passing away of my grandmother had a profound affect on how I see my family; I value everyone around me far more now.

My experience in Outward Bound helped to make me a more responsible person.

Divorce is never an easy thing to go through, especially for a child, but the story of my parents' divorce may help others get through it with less pain.

In *third-person narrative essays*, essays that tell the story (or history) of a thing, person, idea, or event (or series of events), the thesis should state the topic directly:

The development of the transistor was one of the most important technological leaps in human history.

While many people think that America became an empire when it invaded Iraq, it really has a much deeper history with colonialism than most people think.

The life of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. is a story of great perseverance, great faith, and great hope.

The life of a typical coal miner in early 20th century America was often very difficult; Alonzo Orlandi was one such a miner, and his story teaches us a lot about the immigrant experience.

There were several key events that contributed to the passing of the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

An easy way to think about constructing a narrative thesis statement for the narrative essay is to ask yourself some basic questions:

1. What is the basic story I want to tell?
2. Why is this story *relevant* to someone else besides me?
3. How can I create a single statement that tells my reader *what story I want to tell* and *why it's important*?

Consider using one of the following templates below to get you started:

Personal Narrative Essay

[Event you wish to discuss] was an important event in my life because it taught me that [reason the event was important].

The most important experience of my life so far was [event you wish to discuss] because [reason the event was important].

Third-Person Narrative Essays

The story of [event or topic you wish to discuss] is important because it shows us [important themes or ideas your topic illustrates].

Many important things happened to make [major event or topic you wish to discuss] possible.

Expository Thesis Statements

Expository thesis statements generally lay out the specifics of the topic to be explained. In many cases, expository thesis statements announce their *general* subject alongside some more narrow aspects of it to be discussed.

In an essay on *the characteristics of successful first year college students*, for example, the thesis should a.) establish that the essay will be discussing success in college, and b.) provide some more narrow specifics on that subject.

An example:

Many of the most successful students I have encountered in the first-year writing classroom have had several characteristics in common: they attend class regularly, they come to office hours, they ask questions, and they have developed strong time management skills.

Here the general subject, “characteristics of successful first-year students,” is followed by a more specific listing of four characteristics (attending class, coming to office hours, asking questions, and time management skills).



Other examples:

Twentieth-century fascism in Europe was defined by several key features, including racist nationalism, elevation of corporate and capitalist interests, central state control over numerous aspects of life, and aggressive militarism.

*Three of the most influential comic books written in the last thirty years are Frank Miller’s *The Dark Knight Returns*, Alan Moore’s *Watchmen*, Art Spiegelman’s *Maus*, and Alison Bechdel’s *Fun Home*.*

*The main characters of Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird* are small-town lawyer Atticus Finch and his daughter, Scout.*

Sexual harassment can come in many forms: unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favors, and other verbal or physical harassment of a sexual nature.

Many professional dancers are trained in ballet, jazz, tap, and lyrical forms.

Compare-Contrast Thesis Statements

Compare-contrast thesis statements are in some ways easier to construct than narrative thesis statements. These statements are often single, condensed statements of the key similarities and differences between the two (or more) things being discussed. They should outline the *kinds* of similarities the things share, and what *kinds* of differences separate them.

The films Saving Private Ryan and Miracle at St. Anna both explore war-related themes, but they take very different approaches to doing so and come to very different conclusions.

While Coppin State University and Morgan State University are both Historically Black Colleges that are part of the University of Maryland public university system, the institutional philosophies that govern each school and the challenges that they face are quite distinct.

The Baltimore Ravens and Pittsburgh Steelers compete nearly every year for first-place in the AFC North division of the National Football League; these teams, however, are very different in their offensive style, their defensive strategies, and the way they relate to their fans.

While Dr. Stoney Sussan of Johns Hopkins recommends an aggressive radiological approach to dealing with blood-borne diseases, his colleague, Nando Casalena of the University of Maryland, suggests that these disorders can be cured through a regimen of medication applied over time.

In these examples, the similarities between ideas are either explicitly stated or implied. Then the differences selected for contrast are identified.

[The Baltimore Ravens and Pittsburgh Steelers compete nearly every year for first-place in the AFC North division of the National Football League]; [these teams, however are very different in their offensive style, their defensive strategies, and the way they relate to their fans].

The **blue** bracketed text above indicates what draws the two ideas—the Ravens and Steelers—together, and identifies what makes the comparison logically possible or even necessary. Both of the topics under discussion are teams in the AFC North of the NFL—this is what they *share*, what makes them *alike* in some way, which draws readers’ attention to the need for or benefit from looking at them in comparison.

The **red** text above outlines, in general, the things that make the two teams different. The essay will then develop how the teams are different in three main areas: “offensive style,” “defensive strategies,” and “way they relate to their fans.” Subsequent paragraphs would discuss that Pittsburgh, for example, depends on long passes and giving their quarterback a long time to throw the ball, while Baltimore prefers a strong offensive line to run the ball effectively.

Sometimes, however, the similarities of the topics you are discussing can be implied logically (not explicitly stated, but made clear from the structure of your thesis). This makes your reader work a bit more to see the similarities:

While Dr. Stoney Sussan of Johns Hopkins recommends an aggressive radiological approach to dealing with blood-borne diseases, his colleague, Nando Casalena of the University of Maryland, suggests that these disorders can be cured through a regimen of medication applied over time.

Dr. Sussan and Dr. Casalena are, obviously, both doctors, and both work curing blood-borne diseases—this isn't stated directly, but the reader is forced to assume this. The blue text above draws our attention to the things the subjects have in common (doctors, blood-borne diseases). The differences are a bit more spelled out. The red text in the passage above describes that that they have different approaches to treating the same set of illnesses.

As a starting point to help you with creating compare-contrast thesis statements, you might want to start by using one of the templates below:

While [Thing 1] and [Thing 2] are both [key similarity], they are different in [key difference 1], [key difference 2], [key difference 3].

While [Person 1] argues in [Text A] that [perspective of Person 1 in Text A], [Person 2] suggests in [Text B] that [perspective of Person 2 in Text B].

Although many think that [Thing 1] and [Thing 2] are the essentially the same thing, they are different in [way 1], [way 2], and [way 3].

Argument Thesis Statements

An argument paper's thesis may be the easiest kind to identify. It supplies a one-sentence condensation of the entire point that the essay seeks to prove. The thesis states, clearly and directly, *what the essay is trying to persuade its audience to do or think*. It often, but not always, also outlines the main reasons that the claim is valid. These are called **warrants**. Here's a simple example:

Coppin State students who live on campus should not venture outside their dorms at night because of the dangerous werewolves that live near the local middle school.

The red text above shows the essential claim: that Coppin students shouldn't go outside at night. The blue text outlines the basic reason that the audience should feel that this claim is a valid one—the writer contends that werewolves live near the middle school and that they are a danger.

Sometimes, the claim and warrants are a bit more sophisticated—again the claim is red, the warrant is in blue:

The United States should remove all military forces from Afghanistan due to the domestic opposition to the conflict and the excessive cost of maintaining a presence in that country.

The United States should raise the retirement age by one year and raise taxes by 1% to reduce the budget deficit.

Eating a high-fiber diet has many health-related benefits: lowered cholesterol, less hunger, and better overall digestive health.

The first two examples above are clear claim-warrant argument thesis statements—the action that the essay is advocating is the claim, and the reasons that the action should be taken are the warrants. The third example, on high-fiber diets, is more indirect. The claim is that a high fiber diet is a *good* thing; the warrants are the specific benefits that that kind of diet provides.

Some other examples:

If your argument is over FACTS or DEFINITIONS, make sure your thesis states what you seek to prove or disprove or what definition you are advocating:

The American Civil war was anything but “civil”: it was by far the bloodiest conflict in American history.

Though he lived in Indonesia for a few years of his life, Barack Obama is not a Muslim.

Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, the evidence will show that John Smith murdered Robert Johnson in the study with the candlestick on the night of December 12, 1999.

If your argument is about CAUSE or EFFECT, make sure your thesis articulates very specific causal arguments:

The American Civil war was started by a combination of two main factors: regional disagreements over industrialization and the conflict over the moral plausibility of slavery.

Saving Private Ryan revolutionized filmmaking through its innovative cinematography, its groundbreaking use of special effects, and its spectacular sound.

If your argument is primarily a discussion of something's VALUE or a QUALITY that something has, articulate your assertions clearly:

Chocolate ice cream is superior to vanilla ice cream because it has a richer flavor, a creamier texture, and 1/3 fewer calories.

Studying for one's exams is an important and worthwhile activity; it will enable a student to pass with flying colors.

Mark Twain's Adventures of Huckleberry Finn is the most important American literary work because of its innovative use of "real" dialects and its biting social criticism of racism in this country.

Barack Obama has been a very successful president: he has accomplished more in two years than most presidents do in two full terms.

If your argument argues in favor of or against a certain course of ACTION, make sure that action (and your reasons for advocating that course of action) is clearly stated:

Congress should raise corporate income tax to pay for the rising cost of Medicare.

The United States should have a presence in the Middle East indefinitely because of the political instability in the region, the presence of extremist militias, and to secure the availability of oil to American markets.

All English 101 students should go the Writing Center for help at least once per week; this will help them develop skills in generating ideas, planning their writing, drafting, and editing.

If your argument is about someone or something's JURISDICTION or RIGHT TO DO SOMETHING, make your claims explicitly:

The United States has no right to invade sovereign countries such as Syria because it is a breach of international law.

Fathers have every right to input about how their children are raised.

Only women should decide what happens to their bodies; the government should stay out of it.

No organization should have the right to disrupt a private funeral service with a protest, even if that funeral is for a public figure.

The Multipart Thesis—An Easy Starting Point

A device that has helped many create an effective thesis is a template called the *multipart thesis*. This template is simply a strong and direct statement that states the topic of the essay and several divisions or “sub-topics” that the essay will also discuss. These multipart thesis statements can be used for almost any kind of writing.

The multipart thesis is convenient because it helps to lay out what the essay is going to be about in a very specific way, but also because it helps prepare the reader for the order and organization of the discussion to come. The three-part thesis is a central part of the **multipart essay structure**, a very common method of organizing short and medium-length essays. See Chapter 05.2 of this text for more information on multipart essay structure.

Here are a few very simple examples of multipart thesis statements in action.

Coppin State students are bright, resourceful, friendly, and motivated.

The short-term adverse effects of alcohol intoxication are dulled reflexes, impaired senses, and decreased inhibitions.

The United States government should increase funding for Pell grants because it will increase access to education for disadvantaged students, increase diversity in higher education, improve social equality, and improve the economic conditions of urban neighborhoods.

American and European schooling are different in their approaches to critical thinking, the place of technology, student participation, class format, and detailed subject knowledge.

Christopher Nolan’s The Dark Knight was an important contribution to “comic book movies” because of its complex plot, its compelling characters, and its innovative camera work.

The examples above make a point—on *The Dark Knight*, on American vs. European educational philosophies, on what the U.S. government should do for Pell grants—but each also lays out *specific points* that the essay will cover. The red text above indicates the main point the thesis attempts to make; the blue text outlines the sub-topics that the essay will cover. Let’s reconsider the *Dark Knight* example above.

Christopher Nolan’s The Dark Knight was an important contribution to “comic book movies” because of its departures from the genre’s conventions: it featured a complex plot, compelling, rounded characters, and innovative camera work.

The basic idea in this thesis statement is that “*The Dark Knight* was an important contribution to ‘comic book movies. . .’” The reasons that the author thinks this is so are articulated in the second part of the thesis—the list of the three key sub-topics. As readers, we are now prepared to hear that *The Dark Knight* is important because of (1) its complex plot, (2) its compelling characters, and (3) its innovative camera work. The body paragraphs of this essay would develop ideas on plot, characters, and camera work—in that order.

Multipart thesis statements—a general topic and a number of specific sub-topics—can cover almost any subject, and make almost any point. They provide a sense of organization for the essay that follows it. The structure is easy to see in statements like the following:

The most important geological eras in the history of the world have been (1) the Jurassic era, (2) the Cretaceous era, and (3) the Paleolithic era.

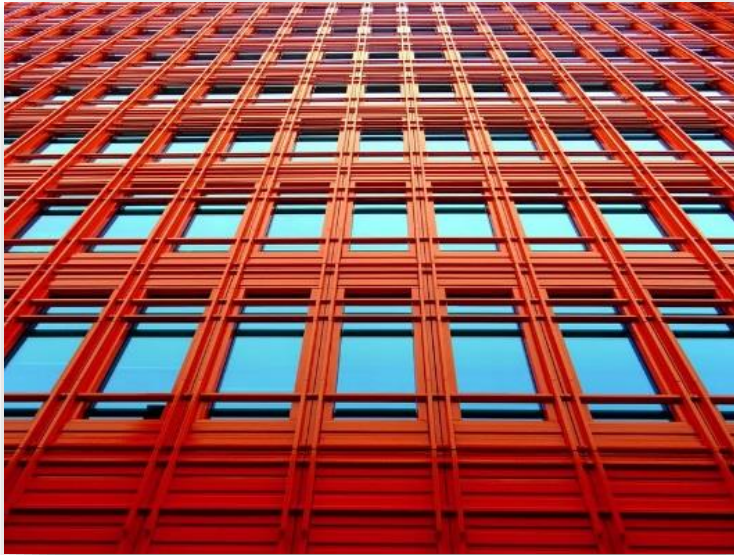
The most common crimes that people experience in Los Angeles are (1) vandalism, (2) theft, (3) assault, and (4) disturbing the peace.

Coppin State should build more student parking because it will (1) make it easier for students to come to class, (2) decrease congestion on the campus, and (3) make students feel more a part of the campus community.

The NBA should bring an expansion team to Baltimore because (1) the city supports its professional teams better than any other major city, (2) Baltimore is a large potential TV market for an NBA franchise, and (3) a regional competitor would push the Washington Wizards into improving as an organization.

Conceptual and Grammatical Parallelism

Conceptual Parallelism



Did you notice anything about how the multipart thesis statements above are organized? How they sound? A key element of the multipart thesis is, obviously, the listing of the thesis statement's sub-topics. This list should be structured so that the items in the list are *conceptually* and *grammatically* parallel ("alike"), which means they should have a.) similar level of generality and b.) a similar grammatical form.

Conceptual parallelism is a matter of choosing appropriate

sub-topics:

John likes to walk, run, and eat.

America should raise taxes on the rich, cut taxes on the poor, and control health care costs.

In the examples above, the ideas that the thesis is putting forth are all conceptually parallel—they are all either voluntary human activities (walking, running, eating) or activities that a government would engage in (raising taxes on the rich, cutting taxes on the poor, controlling health care costs).

In the examples below, the ideas are *not* conceptually parallel, and are thus confusing for a reader and harder to develop:

Kangaroos like to hop, box, and are often found in temperate climates in Australia.

The insect infestation was causing illnesses in the residents of the nursing home, the staff was unhappy, and the insurance companies were delaying payments.

Angela DeMarco, 91, enjoyed dancing, skydiving, and the foxtrot.

In the first example (kangaroos), the topics “hopping” and “boxing” are things that kangaroos *do*; the third element, where they are found, isn’t conceptually connected with what kangaroos *do*.

The “insect infestation” example is confusing—there isn’t a clear thread connecting a topic with the elements of the list; a reader would have to do significant work to discern what is being discussed here.

In the Angela DeMarco example, dancing and skydiving are fairly broad physical activities. The “foxtrot” is a specific type of dancing, and is not only far more specific than the other two elements in the list, but is also a subcategory of dancing, rather than being a parallel category.

Grammatical Parallelism

Items in a list, particularly in a three-part thesis, should also be *grammatically* parallel—meaning that they should all be in a similar grammatical form. This means that the syntax of each part of the statement should sound the same and have the same basic structure.

In this example, the items in the list are all single words:

John Smith is a philanthropist, a genius, and a criminal.

If we want to add more detail to one element of the list—say by adding an adjective—we should add an adjective to the other elements as well, to keep the elements of the list in similar form:

John Smith is a **generous** philanthropist, a **mechanical** genius, and a **devious** criminal.

Changing the grammatical structure of one list element requires a change to the others as well:

John Smith is a **philanthropist of the first order**, a **genius with machines**, and a **criminal in his private life**.

John Smith is a **wealthy and generous philanthropist**, a **brilliant and innovative mechanical genius**, and a **vicious and unrepentant criminal mastermind**.