Finding & Evolving a Thesis

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What a strong thesis does
(see David Rosenwasser & Jill Stephen, 1996)

- A strong thesis *moves / evolves*: it changes as the paper progresses; it is *progressively reformulated*.

- The changes in the thesis are galvanized by its *repeated encounters with evidence*. Like an inert (unreactive) material, a weak thesis neither affects nor is affected by the evidence that surrounds it. By contrast, in nearly all good writing the thesis evolves, gaining in complexity, and thus, in accuracy as the paper progresses.
Seeking out complicating evidence to make thesis more responsive to evidence
(see David Rosenwasser & Jill Stephen, 1996)

Working thesis

Confirming evidence

Complicating evidence

Revised Thesis
An Example: Tax Laws
(see David Rosenwasser & Jill Stephen, 1996)

**Working thesis**: Tax laws benefit the wealthy

**Complicating evidence**: Do people whose wealth comes from investments benefit less or more than those whose wealth comes from high wages?

**Complicating evidence**: Do tax laws, by benefiting the wealthy, also benefit other people indirectly?

- Both necessitate reformulation of the thesis
- Good concluding paragraphs: reflect back on and reformulate your paper’s initial position in light of the thinking you have done
- Use exploratory writing, note-taking and revision stages to weed out false starts and dead ends, but main route from tentative idea to refined and substantiated theory should remain visible for reader to follow
Six steps for making a thesis evolve
(see David Rosenwasser & Jill Stephen, 1996)

1. Formulate *idea* about your subject (working thesis). Should be a claim about the meaning of your evidence that is good enough to get your started.

2. See how far you can make this thesis go in *accounting for evidence*. Use the thesis to explain as much of your evidence as reasonably can.

3. Locate *evidence that is not adequately accounted for* by the thesis. You will need to look actively for such evidence because the initial version of the thesis will incline you to see only what fits and not to notice the evidence that does not.
Six steps for making a thesis evolve cont’d
(see David Rosenwasser & Jill Stephen, 1996)

4. Make explicit the apparent **mismatch between the thesis and selected evidence**. Explain how and why some pieces of evidence do not fit the thesis.

5. **Reshape your claim** to accommodate the evidence that hasn’t fit. This will mean rewording your thesis to resolve or explain apparent contradictions.

6. **Repeat** steps 2, 3, 4, and 5 several times, until you are satisfied that the thesis statement accounts for your evidence as fully and accurately as possible. This is to say that the procedure for making a thesis evolve is recursive: it requires you to go over the same ground repeatedly, formulating successive versions of the thesis that are increasingly accurate in wording and idea.
Sources