

Turning an Obvious Thesis into an Arguable Problem

At some point in our education, we've all been told by a professor that our thesis is "too obvious" or "doesn't go far enough." However, we often do not know how to push an argument further or how to make it less obvious. Here is one way to think through the steps of thesis building. We'll start by examining both strong and weak thesis sentences and then we'll move through a thoughtful strategy for complicating a thesis with an emphasis on developing a problem to explore rather than a statement to prove.

Part 1: In her essay "Never Just Pictures" cultural critic Susan Bordo examines the social and psychological impacts that mediated images of hyper-thin models have on the public. Read the excerpt below, focusing on Bordo's ideas, both explicit and implicit. After you've finished reading, **attempt to write your own thesis** that articulates, in just one or two sentences, the larger significance of Bordo's claims. Bordo writes:

Eating disorders are over-determined in this culture. They have to do not only with new social expectations of women and ambivalence toward their bodies but also with more general anxieties about the body as the source of hungers, needs, and physical vulnerabilities not within our control. These anxieties are deep and long-standing in Western philosophy and religion, and they are especially acute in our own time. Eating disorders are also linked to the contradictions of consumer culture, which is continually encouraging us to binge on our desires at the same time as it glamorizes self-discipline and scorns fat as a symbol of laziness and lack of willpower. And these disorders reflect, too, our increasing fascination with the possibilities of reshaping our bodies and selves in radical ways, creating new bodies according to our mind's design.

The relationship between problems such as these and cultural images is complex. On the one hand, the idealization of certain kinds of bodies foments and perpetuates our anxieties and insecurities, that's clear. Glamorous images of hyper-thin models certainly don't encourage a more relaxed and accepting attitude toward the body, particularly among those whose own bodies are far from that ideal. But, on the other hand, such images carry fantasized solutions to our anxieties and insecurities, and that's part of the reason why they are so powerful. They speak to us not just about how to be beautiful or desirable but about how to get control of our lives, get safe, be cool, avoid hurt. When I look at the picture of a skeletal and seemingly barely breathing young woman, for example, I do not see a vacuous fashion ideal. I see a visual embodiment of what novelist and ex-anorexic Stephanie Grant means when she says in her autobiographical novel, *The Passion of Alice*, "If I had to say my anorexia was about any single thing, I would have said it was about living without desire. Without longing of any kind."

Bordo, Susan. "Never Just Pictures." *50 Essays: A Portable Anthology*. Ed. Samuel Cohen. New York: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2007. 88. Print.

Part 2: Below are some obvious thesis statements based on the above reading. See if you can identify what, in particular, makes them too self-evident or ordinary.

- 1) Anorexia is a major cultural problem that affects many women from all walks of life.
- 2) Susan Bordo believes there is a problematic relationship between the ideals of capitalism and the idealized body image.
- 3) If one buys into to the media worship of hyper-thin models, one will undoubtedly have an eating disorder.

Next is a series of more complicated thesis statements. Try to compare the two sets to enrich your sense of what specific traits make the below theses more compelling than the above:

- 4) Although we often scapegoat the media for creating undue anxiety about our bodies, Bordo sees the problem as systemic and deeply rooted in “western philosophy and religion.” This dynamic between anxiety and religion leaves the reader to wonder what specific cultural values shape our superficiality.
- 5) Bordo compares the psychology of eating disorders to the mindset of the marketplace: both encourage overindulgence while celebrating self-discipline. In other words, the cyclical, self-destructive impulse to binge and purge extends from a fundamentally hypocritical system. If this is true, then could one argue that the bigger issue is not one’s relationship to one’s body image, but to consumer culture?
- 6) While Bordo proposes that these cultural images of “hyper-thin models” are worth investigating, she seems equally fascinated by the counterintuitive ways that these images project a sense of control and escape. Does the celebration of thinness have less to do with aesthetics and fashion than with a cultural mandate to be cool and unfeeling?

Part 3: While a thesis is, of course, the “main point” of one’s essay, there are a host of other characteristics that help to more precisely define it. A compelling thesis ...

- **Must be more than a statement of fact; it is a debatable claim with potential counter-arguments.** Thesis 1 is a factual statement that no sensible reader would disagree with (Bordo clearly believes that eating disorders are a problem). In turn, Thesis 3, while not a statement of fact, is a categorical claim that leaves no room for argumentation and overstates Bordo’s ideas. Thesis 4, on the other hand, attempts to extend Bordo’s argument by proposing the need to further explore our cultural values. This proposition could reasonably be agreed or disagreed with by a reader. But it can’t be dismissed since it draws on evidence from the text in insightful ways.

- **Raises a compelling intellectual question or problem.** In addition to offering a tension or challenge, a good thesis often raises a compelling question (implicitly or explicitly). This question should be intellectual in nature – or it should be conceptual and not just topical or literal. Thesis 4 and 5 point to a deeper problem while Thesis 6 interrogates why the fashion industry embraces personas that project a lack of feeling. By doing so, the writer proposes to extend Bordo’s claim about how our cultural values inform our emotions.
- **Focuses on precise, clearly defined terms.** Thesis 2 employs vague language (“problematic ways”) at a crucial moment rather than explicitly explaining to the reader what, in particular, is problematic about the relationship between body image and capitalism. Thesis 6, however, clearly announces its specific focus on the concepts of “control,” “escape,” and the “cultural mandate to be cool.”
- **Sets up a compelling tension that points to hidden, counter-intuitive or non-obvious claims.** One of the more difficult aspects of writing a decent thesis is to avoid the habit of falling back on clichéd, conventional, or obvious claims. To avoid doing so, you might consider setting up a tension between what is obvious or known and what is not obvious or not known. Thesis 4, for example, sets up a challenge to the standard argument against the media: we typically blame the media for making us uncomfortable with our bodies. In this way, the student is able to quickly go beyond the obvious claim to uncover something more nuanced and original: That our anxiety may be more deeply rooted in an enduring cultural tradition.
- **Often asserts or implies the argument’s structure.** A good thesis will often do more than announce an argument; it will also give the reader a sense of how the argument will be laid out in the ensuing essay. Thesis 1 offers no sense of the proceeding argument’s structure (it’s only made up of one claim / one point, which will likely be repeated). Thesis 6, on the other hand, contains several claims that imply specific relationships: the argument will likely first discuss the ways in which cultural images of thinness encourage anxiety, then how this anxiety grows from a need for control, and finally how this desire for control arises in a culture that discourages emotion.
- **Leaves room to investigate complications, implications, and potential counter-arguments.** Whereas Thesis 3 is a one-note claim that can only be repeated throughout the essay, Theses 4, 5, and 6 all have the potential to be developed in thoughtful and compelling ways as the essay moves forward. Moreover, they each point beyond Bordo’s essay, suggesting the possibility that new sources may come in.

- **Tends to be syntactically complex, perhaps even more than one sentence.** Thesis 1 is weak partly because it's too short (a simple declarative sentence), whereas Theses 4, 5, and 6 use complex sentence structures and detailed language.
- **Provides clear reasons for its claims.** Not only is Thesis 3 too absolute (as we've noted above), but it's also unclear. How does buying into the media-hype lead to eating disorders? What is the cause-and-effect relationship? Thesis 5, in contrast, clearly sets up a causal link: the capitalist compulsion to buy and budget informs the unhealthy dynamic of binging and purging.

Part 4: Return to the draft of the thesis you wrote at the beginning of this guide and see if you can now rethink, extend, and/or complicate it in light of the principles outlined above.