

## Building a Better Thesis Statement



# *BUILDING A BETTER THESIS STATEMENT*

*Neta Gordon*



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# Introduction

**The content of this Pressbook responds to a common student question:  
How do I improve my thesis statement?**

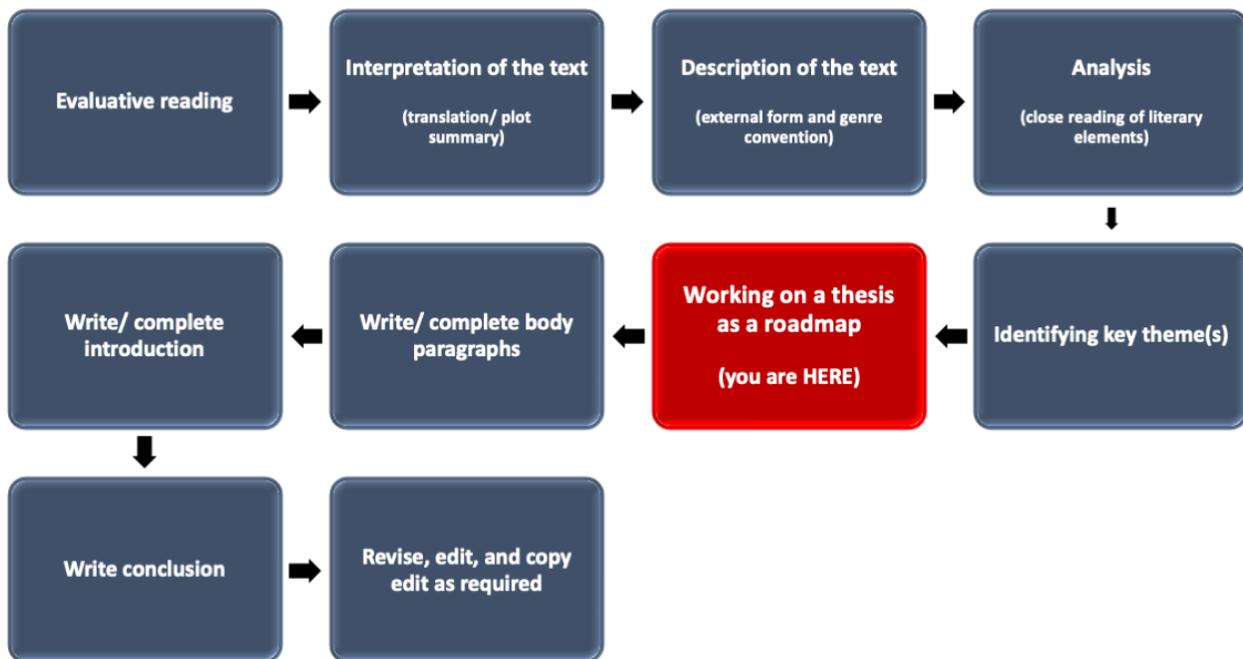
To start: the quality and sophistication of a thesis statement will largely depend on the quality and sophistication of the literary analysis. That said, the process of configuring a complex thesis statement is a helpful step for organizing and/or finding gaps in analysis. Also, the process can help students embed a sense of development and logic into their essay.

The goal of this stage in essay writing is to craft a thesis statement that has a three-part structure (set up – intervention – argumentative statement). The complex thesis statement will serve as a road-map to the rest of the essay, with each part of the thesis connecting to subsequent body paragraphs.



# Writing a Critical Analysis of a Literary Text

As the pathway below indicates, working on a thesis statement depends on a great deal of preceding work (and – in fact – it is often the case that students have difficulties with essay writing because they have not spent enough time on careful, analytical reading). However, the focus of this lesson is not textual analysis, but crafting a thesis statement. Thus, the analysis noted on the following slides should be considered the result of an earlier, crucial stage of the essay writing process.





## Text: "Mid-Term Break" by Seamus Heaney



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# Interpretation & Initial Thesis

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# Critical Analysis

This section includes some descriptive and analytical “data,” as well as associated critical assertions. As per the essay writing “pathway,” interpretation, description, analysis, as well as a certain amount of thinking about why what one has noticed is significant, should precede the crafting of a thesis statement.

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## Some more descriptive analytical data, here focusing on external form

Lyric “I” speaker.

The speaker is not a persona, but an older version of the “I” in the poem.

There is no clear rhyme scheme.

Every stanza but the last includes three lines, usually of pentameter, and the last two lines form a rhyming couplet broken up by a stanza break.

The diction is plain.

The speaker describes every scene.

There is evidence of caesura and enjambment.

The use of enjambment is far more frequent, with many thoughts running over the end of poetry lines. The third line, and also the final two lines, are end-stopped.

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## Some more descriptive analytical data, here focusing on imagery and figures

The first stanza references the speaker “Counting bells knelling classes to a close” (2).

Analysis:

The image can be read metaphorically, whereby the knelling bells might be compared to bells that toll at a funeral, and whereby the vehicle “classes” can be compared with the tenor “life”.

Many phrases draw attention to the passage of time.

See, for example, most of the first stanza, as well as the reference to “ten o’clock [when] the ambulance arrived” (and 14), the “[n]ext morning” (916) and “the first time in six weeks” (18).

Also, many descriptions indicate the age of characters.

The sixth stanza includes a personification.

See “[s]nowdrops/[a]nd candles [which] soothed the bedside” (16-17).

The seventh stanza uses a metaphor to describe the boy’s fatal injury as “a poppy bruise” (19).

Analysis:

(tenor = injury/bruise, vehicle = poppy, ground = the colour red, cause of forgetfulness, something small, yet powerful.

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### **Some preliminary argumentative statements**

The pattern of the three-line stanza is disrupted at the end of the poem, and many lines make use of enjambment,

reinforcing the idea that the death of a child disrupts normal conceptions of the life cycle.

The metaphor of the “poppy bruise” (19) calls to mind opium and forgetfulness, suggesting the way poem focuses on how to manage grief.

Although the diction matches the plain speech of a young man, the complexity of the literary figures, together with the frequent references to the passage of time and people’s ages, indicates the implicit perspective of an older speaker who is reflecting on a family tragedy from an emotional distance.

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# The Three-Part Thesis

**A sophisticated thesis statement need not be one sentence that seeks to sum up an entire argument. Rather, you should try to include three separate parts to your “statement” in order to highlight with precision the focus of your analysis and to provide a logical road-map to the rest of your essay.**

Start with:

- A. A set-up that draws attention to your analytical focus, or the context for your analysis.

Move to:

- B. An intervention, in which you draw attention to the way or ways in which the text warrants closer inspection (in the intervention you may want to provide some or all of the evidence topics you will use in the rest of your paper).

End with:

- C. An argument, in which you state clearly why the evidence you will focus on reflects a significant claim you wish to make about the text (and, if you have not already done so, the argumentative statement should make note of the evidence topics you will use in the rest of your paper).

# Towards a “Better Thesis” for Analysis of “Mid-Term Break”

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# Thesis and Outline

**Another helpful effect of crafting a three-part thesis statement is that students can avoid a common weakness in essay writing, which is the tendency to “prove” the same idea over and over again. Once you have crafted a three-part thesis statement, you can connect each part of your statement to a body paragraph, which will give your essay a sense of logical development.**

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# Towards a "Better Thesis" for Analysis of "Very Simply Topping Up the Brake Fluid"

The following exercise is focused on crafting a three-part thesis statement, using analytical data associated with a close reading of Simon Armitage's dramatic monologue "Very Simply Topping Up the Brake Fluid."<sup>1</sup>

- **Read** Armitage's poem and consider your own evaluative and interpretive response, as well as matters of rhythm, rhyme, diction, and voice.
- **Review** the following pieces of analytical data, gleaned from close reading, making sure that you understand each point:

The poem is a dramatic monologue, like Browning's "My Last Duchess".

It contains all the conventions of a dramatic monologue, including a speaker whose persona is clearly distinct from that of the poet (a car mechanic), a silent auditor who listens to the speech (a woman who has brought in her car to have the brake fluid topped up), an occasion for the speech (the mechanic explaining to the woman how to top up the brake fluid), and – arguably – a sense of the ironic distance between author and speaker (Armitage's tone is critical, as the mechanic's manner toward the woman is patronizing, as is made most clear in the final words, "Tell your husband" [line 24]).

The diction is plain, and there are several indications that Armitage wants to mimic the colloquial speech of the mechanic,

for example when the speaker says, "Go on, it won't / eat you" (lines 4-5), or in the frequent reference to the silent auditor as "love" (lines 1, 10, 19, 22). Further, the rhythms of plain speech are reinforced by the consistent use of both enjambment and caesura throughout the poem. Finally, the speech of the mechanic seems realistic due to his use of technical language to describe the car parts, for example the "fan-belt" (line 5), the "spade connector" (line 7), and the "float-chamber" (line 13).

In tension with Armitage's efforts to mimic the plain speech of his speaker are the poem's strict meter and rhyme scheme.

Each line is written in hendecasyllables (or, each line has eleven syllables) and the rhyme scheme for each

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1. Armitage, Simon. "Very Simply Topping Up the Brake Fluid." *The Broadview Introduction to Literature*, edited by Lisa Chalykoff, Neta Gordon, & Paul Lumsden, 2nd ed., Broadview Press, 2018, p. 1256.

stanza is ABBA, though many of the rhymes are slant rhymes (or words that almost rhyme, such as “fluid” [line 2] and “toolkit” [line 3]).

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**Review the following:**



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**Copy and paste the following template into the text box below** to create a more complex thesis statement. On the next slide you can export your response to continue your work on it.



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