Developing a Thesis - Narrowing Your Topic

To write a clear and concise essay - our goal, of course - we must select a precise topic and develop a thesis that lets your reader know what your essay will be about. Often, we begin with a broad subject and narrow it to a manageable topic.

The student who wanted to write a 500-word essay about Persian music, for example, found that he could subdivide the subject as follows:

- Persian music
  - The musical instruments of Persia
  - Persian musical theory
  - Forms of Persian music
  - Composers of Persian music
  - The origins of Persian music
  - Western influences on Persian music

Considering his list, the student decided he wanted to write about the last item. He then further subdivided this into three categories:

- Western influences on Persian music
  - The influence of Western classical music on Persian music
  - The influence of Western popular music on popular music in Iran
  - The influence of Western popular music on Iranian youth

The student chose the first of these, the influence of Western classical music on Persian music since he was aware that such influence had taken many different forms - tours by Western orchestras in Iran, the prominence of Western recording on Iranian radio, Iranian adaptations of pieces by Western composers, Iranian musicians responsible for the introduction of Western musical traditions into Iranian music, the teaching of Western musical theory in Iran, and so on. He decided to limit himself still further, choosing to focus on one particular figure responsible for this phenomenon. At last, the student arrived at his real topic:

Vaziri's contribution to bringing the influence of Western classical music to Persian music.

The student had narrowed his broad subject down to a manageable topic. However he still needed to narrow this topic down to a clear thesis, to state what it was he wanted to say about the topic. Whereas the topic can be expressed in a word or phrase (for example, Persian music, or Vaziri's contribution to bringing the influence of Western classical music to Persian music), a thesis can be expressed only in a complete sentence. It may be possible to create a thesis by merely turning the phrase into a sentence (for instance, Vaziri helped bring the influence of Western classical music to Iran.) However, the writer will have something more definite to work with if he considers the topic and decides more precisely what he wants to say about it before beginning to write. The more definite the thesis, the more controlled and unified the essay is likely to be. In this example, the student...
expressed his thesis as follows:

By introducing Western instruments and musical ideas into the orchestra he founded in Tehran, Vaziri created a new kind of Persian music.

The thesis sentence above is long and complicated, qualifying the main idea (Vaziri created a new kind of Persian music) with several subordinate pieces of information (Vaziri founded an orchestra in Tehran and introduced Western instruments and musical ideas into it). The main idea in a thesis is sometimes called the core thesis. The combination of the core thesis with the subordinate material can be called the thesis statement. A short, simple thesis may be adequate for planning a short narrative or simple description, but a long complex thesis statement is preferable for a lengthy or complex analysis or argument.

Exercise
Identify each of the following as either a subject (S), topic (T), or thesis (Th).
1. Love
2. How immature love affects decision-making
3. When young people rush into a relationship without giving it time to mature, they can make rash but unreasonable decisions.
4. Prejudice
5. The prejudices of parents can poison the lives of their children.
6. Requiring that students wear uniforms reduces freedom, diminishes creativity, and creates an environment that does not encourage free expression of ideas.
7. Requiring students to wear uniforms
8. Courage
9. For Atticus Finch, acting consistently with his belief that every American deserves a fair trial is more important than retaining his family's privacy and safety.
10. Hip hop has positively affected music.
11. Though many people dismiss hip hop as offensive, hip hop music offers urban youth an important opportunity for artistic expression and allows them to articulate the poetry of the street.

Evaluating your thesis
In the following opening paragraph from an analytical essay, the writer leads up to her thesis statement (underlined).

Adolescent girls often see teen magazines as handbooks on how to be teenagers. These magazines affect the way they act and look and can exert enormous influence. There are many popular magazines to choose from, and girls who don't really know what they want are the most eager readers.

Discussion: An effective thesis statement clearly states the focus of the essay and suggests a pattern of development for the writing. The above thesis statement does neither. The thesis statement below is stronger and provides direction for the rest of the essay.

Unfortunately, the advise that teen magazines give about self-image, fashion, and boys may do more harm than good.
Forming a Thesis Statement

A thesis statement declares your unique perspective on the topic. It gives you the necessary focus and direction to develop your essay. As your ideas evolve, you might find it necessary to revise your thesis once or twice.

A thesis statement is usually a single sentence and appears in the opening part of an essay. The thesis may be based on a feature of the topic or on a particular stand that you want to defend.

A manageable topic (exercise and anorexia) + a specific feature (a connection exists between the two) = an effective thesis

Thesis statement: Evidence suggests that a connection exists between excessive exercise and anorexia, resulting in a condition known as “activity anorexia.”

A manageable topic (multicultural education) + a specific stand (is vital to a society made up of many different peoples) = an effective thesis

Thesis statement: Multicultural education is vital to a society made up of many different peoples.

Example Thesis statements:
• Barbed hooks (topic) should be banned from lure fishing to protect undersized fish (particular stand).
• Agroterrorism (topic) poses a significant threat to the United States (specific feature).
• Isolation, the main theme in Frankenstein (topic), plays out in Walton’s letters to his sister Margaret (a specific feature).
• Though economic sanctions appear to be a powerful peacetime weapon (topic), they actually appear to do more harm than good (particular stand).

Developing Ideas for Your Thesis Statement

As you read, look for:
• Interesting contrasts or comparisons or patterns emerging in the information
• Is there something about the topic that surprises you?
• Do you encounter ideas that make you wonder why?
• Does something an “expert” says make you respond, “No way! That can’t be right!” or “Yes, absolutely. I agree!”

Select a topic (television violence and children)
Ask an interesting question: What are the effects of television violence on children? Revise the question into a thesis: Violence on television increases aggressive behavior in preschool children.
Now, find/develop the evidence to prove your thesis true, or revise your thesis to reflect what research/evidence indicates.
Exercise:
Develop thesis statements on the following topics:
• high school sports
• high stakes testing
• steroid use in professional sports
• divorce
• school dances
• music censorship

Checklist for a Thesis Statement
_____ Does my thesis focus on a specific writing idea (topic)?
_____ Does my thesis accurately address the purpose of the assignment?
_____ Is my thesis stated in a clear, direct sentence (or sentences)?
_____ Is my thesis supported by the information I have gathered?
_____ Do I have enough evidence to support my thesis throughout the entire essay?
_____ Does my thesis do more than state the obvious? (Does it pass the “So What?” or “Who cares? test? Not...“Everyone knows that”).
_____ Is my thesis arguable? (Does it state a particular stand that I must prove?)
_____ Is my thesis broad enough so as not to limit my ideas but specific enough to give my essay focus?

Sources:
Springfield Township School District, Orelan, PA www.sdst.org/shs/library/thesis.html, 04/27/09