



Douglas College Learning Centre

Finding a Strong Thesis

Detectives search for clues, and from those clues they draw a conclusion about who committed a crime. Academic writing is a lot like that. Academics search for information, and from that information, they draw a conclusion about what is true. The conclusion becomes their thesis. This handout shows how you can apply detective skills in searching for a strong thesis.

A Good Detective:

- **Understands the assignment**
 - Your mission, should you decide to accept it...
- Digs up and **considers all the clues** available.
 - Witnesses, a broken clock, footprints in the garden...
- **Remains open-minded**; looks for alternative ways to understand the facts.
 - The butler didn't necessarily do it!
- Identifies a list of possible suspects and **evaluates the evidence** for and against each.
 - Mrs. Peacock? Colonel Mustard? Professor Plum?



Now, let's look at these qualities in relation to developing a thesis for an academic paper.

As an academic writer, you should:

Understand your assignment.

The first step in writing a thesis is to fully understand the assignment instructions. You need to know about the required format, length and focus. To focus your initial research, look for key terms in the instructions.

Let's say your assignment instructions tell you to write a paper based on "a historical analysis of minority groups who have immigrated to Canada following the conclusion of the Second World War." The key concepts of these assignment instructions are *minority groups*, *immigration*, and *post-Second World War*. These terms will help you choose how to focus your thesis and your research.

Dig up and consider all the clues available.

As a detective looks for clues, you need to do research. You need to limit your area of research so that you can concentrate your detective work on a defined area. A detective would not look for clues all over town; he would focus on the scene of the crime.

For the topic on post-war immigration of minority groups, you might choose to focus on a particular group of immigrants or on a particular area of Canada they immigrated to. You might choose to focus on why they chose to come to Canada or what they did when they got here. Choosing a tentative focus for your thesis will allow you to focus your research. Your research will then help you to focus your thesis further.

Once you have chosen a focus, try to collect a wide range of facts and opinions about your focused topic. Use *who*, *what*, *when*, *where*, *why* and *how* questions to help you explore your topic thoroughly. Your research should examine the topic from many angles.

If you chose to focus on the reasons they came to Canada, you might ask: *What countries did these immigrants come from? What were their situations in their countries of origin? Where in Canada did they go? What did they do when they got here? When did they come? Why did the Canadian government accept them into the country? What were the immigration laws like in Canada at that time? What incentives were there for immigrants to come here? What barriers to immigration did they face in other countries? How were the immigrants treated when they got here?*

Look for all the clues. Don't just pick and choose sources that support one point of view. Look for alternate views. This stage of developing a thesis should be messy; it should include a variety of ideas, many of which may be conflicting. Consider conflicting points of view you learn about in your research. Try to understand how and why the views are different.

Record the ideas you find, just like a detective records all the clues in his notebook.

Remain open-minded; look for alternate ways to understand the facts.

Don't try to settle on a thesis too soon. You need to reserve judgment until you have thoroughly researched the facts. Look for alternate ways to understand the facts.

Your research on why immigrants chose Canada could suggest that immigrants didn't really choose Canada at all. They didn't choose it for its natural resources, its climate or its religious freedoms. This means you need to reconsider your focus. Because you need to follow the evidence, you need to look at alternate conclusions you can make from the information you have. Maybe you can conclude that they left their countries of origin for economic and political reasons. A second possibility is to look at the role they played when they got to Canada in building modern-day Canada. Or, you could conclude that Canada's immigration laws at the time were the most significant factor in deciding what immigrant groups came to Canada. The important thing is that your conclusions are based on your research.

Identify a list of possible suspects and evaluate the evidence for and against each.

As you gather your information, begin to explore possible conclusions you can make based on the facts and ideas you have found. Keep a record of all your ideas. Consider pros and cons for each. Once you have completed your research, choose the conclusion that is most interesting, insightful and supportable. This will be your working thesis! As you work on your paper, you may refine this thesis, but for now, it provides a good starting place for planning and writing your paper.

For more information about what makes a good thesis, refer to Learning Centre handout WR4.20 *The Thesis: Four Requirements*. The internet also has a lot of good ideas on strategies for finding a thesis.

