

I. Why Write a Critical Thesis?

Writing a thesis is a significant commitment—of your time, of your emotional energy, of your brainpower, of your spirit. But if you're writing a thesis for the right reasons it should also be fun, fulfilling, and enriching. Part I of the following is designed to get you thinking about your reasons for wanting to write one; Part II helps you get started.

The Big Reason for writing a thesis is probably different for everyone, and you will have to find it yourself. It's safe to say, however, that your big, motivating reason for writing a thesis should *come from somewhere within*. In other words, your interest (in novel P, or writer Q, or problem R, or form S) should be *your own*, even if you don't yet understand it or where it came from. Here's some examples of what these reasons might sound like:

- *I want to understand writer X or genre Y so that I can go on and do Z*
 - Say, I want to understand how Emily Dickinson's poems work so that I can write better poems; or I want to understand William Faulkner's characters so that I can write better characters; or I want to understand satire so that I can write better jokes; or, I want to understand Fredrick Douglass's rhetoric so I can go and write political speeches
- *I want to understand problem X at time T because Y*
 - Say, I want to understand how race was depicted in novels in the Jim Crow era because I'm interested in how race is depicted and discussed today; or, I want to think about gender or queerness in Shakespeare's late romances because I'm uneasy with how it's portrayed in Y medium; or, I want to write about dystopic environmental fiction because just look out your window
 - Note: *you don't have to write about your contemporary motivations at any length or at all; often, more interesting work results from delimiting your scope*
- *I simply want to understand and know more about and better appreciate X*
 - Say, I really love the intimacy of first-person narrators and I want to explore why; or, I'm just fascinated by World War II and want to know how it shaped people's memories—I don't know why; or, I took a class where we read James Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room* and I can't get its sentences out of my head—I want to know what got them stuck there, and whether his work, or the people he read, will have a similar effect on me
- *I'm interested in X aspect of human experience and want to use literature to think about it, perhaps to change myself or the way I think about it. I want to grow as a writer or thinker or human being.*
 - Say, I just experienced a loss, or a problem, or a revelation, and I feel like Virginia Woolf and James Joyce might help me work through it and its consequences; or, I recently figured out that I tend to think about politics, or friendship, or art like X—maybe John Keats, or contemporary novellas, or medieval lives of saints can help me think, and behave, differently

Littler Reasons: *Professor X mentioned Y since I liked Z, and I liked Y, so now I want to read A, B & C; I'm curious about what literary work P will look like under theory Q; I noticed G and don't think anyone has ever noticed it before; I want to see if grad school might be right for me.*

Insufficient Reasons: *My roommate is writing a thesis; my parents think I should write one; it'll look good on my CV; it will look good on my shelf, next to my Collected Works of Proust.*

II. Research Question Generator

Really good research questions are puzzles without easy answers. If you think you already know the answer to a research question, it probably won't be very interesting to other people, or to yourself six or eight months from now. The work you put into articulating that question and journey you take in answering it, even if it changes shape or you swap out your primary texts, will shine through in your final product. Your thoughts and attitudes about your question will inevitably change and *so*, ideally, *will you*.¹ Here are some questions that might help you get started.

1. What are some **questions you've encountered in previous classes** that really got you excited? These could be questions raised in lecture, discussion, final exams or your own writing. Look for patterns in the kinds of questions you like.

2. What are some **large-scale questions about literature** that keep you reading and thinking about it?² Note—*these questions are perhaps, ultimately, unanswerable. And that's fine.*

3. What are some **medium-scale questions about literature** you'd like to investigate?³

4. What are some **super-specific questions about authors, texts or historical periods** you want to investigate?⁴ *Most of your work on the thesis will probably move between these kinds of questions and the medium-scale questions, even as the Big Questions guide and ground you and keep you going.*

¹ This probably sounds grandiose, especially in italics. But it also happens, I think, to be true. I'd imagine that most of you want to write a thesis so that you come out on the other side of it a changed person, feeling capable of doing things and seeing things you couldn't before. Right?

² For instance: *how is a literary work related to its historical context—is it simply a symptom of its times, or can it resist or change its time? How? What happens in your brain (mind? soul? body?) when you're reading a work of literature—is it different from what happens in other aspects of life (like having a conversation, or looking at a painting, or falling in love, or reading Twitter)? Can literature talk about things that other media (like nonfiction, or film) or other discourses (like science, or philosophy) can't? Why isn't "genre" literature considered "literature"? Or is it (now)? What does Dickinson mean when she says that poetry "tell[s] all the truth but tell[s] it slant"—does poetry "tell the truth"? How is literature related to or how can it faithfully depict: war; the law; medicine; love; suffering; family dynamics; psychology; violence; climate change; difficult ethical decisions; political conflict; problems of gender or sexuality; work or class; identity or intersectionality; an author's experience; hope; etc.?*

³ For example: *How are eighteenth-century novels related to the rise of liberalism and the middle class? How are contemporary transnational novels related to globalism, or the internet, or migration patterns? How does mid-century American drama address problems of race? How does Romantic poetry deal with the disappointments of the French Revolution? Why do Jane Austen's characters seem to X or Y in the face of Z? Why does so much science fiction take place in Q? How do contemporary novels begin?*

⁴ E.g.: *what's the deal with James Joyce's weird obsession with Humpty Dumpty? How do Virginia Woolf's jokes work? Why "mortal coil"? Why on the last page of novel Y does author X say "Z"?!?! Because seriously.*