

Writing a Strong Thesis or “Crux”¹

“Crux” comes from the Latin word for “cross.” When used about a text, it refers to a point where things come together, an intellectual knot. Analytical writing deals with cruxes. It seeks to untie them and show their strands to the reader. It seeks to re-knot the strands in such a way that the relationships are clear to the reader.

You may be familiar with the term “thesis.” A crux is a kind of thesis, but a crux demands more rigor. A thesis may be wan and descriptive and lead to a paper with weak argumentation. To write a good argumentative paper, you need to look for a strong thesis or crux, a genuine problem that requires explanation or analysis.

A strong thesis or crux unifies and organizes your essay because all your other ideas can be arranged in relation to it. Therefore, condensing your main idea into a recognizable thesis or crux will keep your main idea focused and clear in your head.

Here is an example of a weak thesis reformulated into a strong thesis or crux:

Weak thesis: In *The Secret Garden*, Burnett show how Mary and the garden grow together. [Obvious, isn't it? Leads to a description: Mary grows like this, the garden grows like this. Very dull.]

Stronger thesis: In *The Secret Garden*, Burnett uses the stylistic device of color description to show how Mary's emotional development parallels the growth of the garden. [Better. Will lead to an analytical essay tracing the use of color descriptions. But will still be mainly descriptive: On page X, Burnett uses “yellow.” On page X, she uses “red.” Solid, but not thrilling.]

Crux: In *The Secret Garden*, Burnett's description of the parallel development of Mary and the garden points to a larger narrative characteristic. The plot of Burnett's novel can be seen to progress by a series of parallelisms: between Mary and the garden, between Mary's mother and Martha's mother, between Colin and his father. Yet the various parallelisms cannot be resolved into one simple pattern. Parallel characters can be compared, or contrasted, or they can exhibit a strange, symbiotic relationship. [Whew! That's long! But it does pose both an analytical point (stylistic, narrative) and an argumentative one (that none of the parallels are exact—that Burnett's story is more complex than it first seems.)]

Incidentally, it took TWO full hours of thinking and re-reading the novel to come up with all that! This isn't easy! In fact, you will probably have to write all three kinds of theses before you get to your final, perfect crux. Notice that all three say basically the same thing: that parallelism is important to the novel. But each thesis says it differently. The final thesis just takes the same basic theme and gets more specific about it.

¹ Department of English, Cornell University. *Sourcebook for New Instructors*. Ed. Alice Maurice. June, 1998: 367.