

Writing a Thesis

THE INTRODUCTORY PARAGRAPH AND THESIS STATEMENT

Sample Question: To what extent did the Civil War constitute a revolution in American society?

STRUCTURING AN INTRODUCTORY PARAGRAPH:

1. Establish the setting of the essay. Briefly introduce the reader to the subject.
- Example: "The Civil War, occurring between the years 1861 and 1865, was the most devastating conflict in American history."
2. Provide an insightful comment that establishes your basis for analysis.
- Example: "In determining whether the Civil War was a revolution in American society, one must assess the extent to which society was changed by the war."
3. Provide a partition that establishes three major sub-topics you plan to discuss.
- Example: "Politically, the war established the supremacy of the Republican party in national politics for much of the next fifty years. Socially, the war saw significant gains in African American rights. And constitutionally, the war established the supremacy of the federal government over the states."
4. Finish paragraph with a clear thesis statement that establishes the purpose of the essay.
- Example: "Thus, the Civil War did, in fact, represent a political, social and constitutional revolution in America."

THESIS TYPES:

1. Simple thesis: "The Civil War was a revolution in American society." (Rating: poor)
- Thesis is far too simplistic. It contains no partition or analysis.
2. Complex-simple thesis: "In some respects, Americans experienced profound changes during the war. After the war, it was clear that society had also been changed dramatically in a number of important areas." (Rating: fair)
- The analytical aspect of the thesis is promising. However, no partition is established. The thesis does not establish how American society was changed by the war.
3. Simple-split thesis: "The Civil War was a revolution in America politically, socially, and constitutionally." (Rating: fair)
- Thesis provides a partition: politics, society, and the Constitution.
- Thesis lacks an explanation or general analysis in each of the three areas in the partition.
- Note: This thesis would be a "simple thesis" if the question already contained a partition.
4. Complex-split thesis: "Politically, the war established the supremacy of the Republican party in national politics for much of the next fifty years. Socially, the war saw significant gains in African American rights. And constitutionally, the war established the supremacy of the federal government over the states. Thus, the Civil War did in fact represent a political, social and constitutional revolution in America." (Rating: superior)

THE "GRAY AREA" THESIS

Many AP questions allow the student to formulate a thesis with more nuances. Here is a more sophisticated complex-split thesis to the above question:

"Although the Civil War resulted in the supremacy of the Republican party for the next fifty years and led to a constitutional revolution regarding African American rights, blacks in the South were virtually abandoned by the North in 1877 and subsequently dominated by the white-supremacist Democratic party of the "Solid South. Thus, to a larger extent, the Civil War did represent a revolution constitutionally and in national politics but it was not a complete revolution regarding social and political issues in the South."

Notice that the above thesis argues "to a larger extent." When answering a question, the writer must take a position. It is not enough to state "to some extent" or "to another extent." A thesis should take a position one way or another. Phrases such as "to a larger extent," "to a lesser extent," "more important," "less important," etc., reveal that the writer has taken a

definite position on a question.

Moreover, the word "although" is used effectively to begin the thesis.

It is important not to try to write a thesis that is all "black" or all "white." The most effective essays attempt to navigate the "gray area" in a more sophisticated fashion. The highest scores on AP exams tend to be in the "gray area."

RELATING THE BODY OF THE ESSAY TO THE THESIS

Many AP essays will fall under the traditional 5-paragraph format (introduction, three body paragraphs, and conclusion). The most effective essays consistently analyze the significance of events relating to the thesis. Observe the outline below:

- Body Paragraph #1:
- Topic Sentence
 - Term or event #1:
 - Definition
 - Significance/ relate to thesis
 - Term or event #2:
 - Definition
 - Significance/relate to thesis
 - Term or event #3:
 - Definition
 - Significance/relate to theses
 - Linking sentence

The following paragraph is written with the above outline in mind.

The Civil War resulted in a constitutional revolution in several ways (topic sentence #1). First, the 13th Amendment, which abolished slavery (definition), ended an institution in America that had lasted well over two centuries (significance). Such a monumental change in the Constitution is certainly grounds for considering this amendment revolutionary (relates to thesis). Moreover, two more amendments were passed within a few years of the Civil War. The 14th Amendment gave African Americans citizenship while the 15th Amendment gave blacks the right to vote (definition). These two amendments were certainly revolutionary in the North as African Americans now enjoyed rights that up until this time had been largely denied (significance/relate to thesis). Furthermore, although the Constitution did not specifically declare that the federal government had gained more power over the states, the fact that the Union won the war and forced the South to accept these amendments ultimately proved that nullification issues would no longer plague the U.S. as they had earlier in the 19th century (significance/relates to theses). While many African Americans in the South did enjoy increased voting rights in the years immediately following the Civil War, many Southern states would eventually make a mockery of these sacred promises (linking sentence).

Thus, African Americans in the South did not experience a revolution in the years following the end of Reconstruction in 1876 (topic sentence #2). Etc.