

Sharpening Your Thesis

to better demonstrate
your critical thinking

What does an evaluative thesis do?

- It presents your clear pitch about the effectiveness of your subject.
- It predicts the shape of your argument.
- It sets the standard of proof for your paper.

So, NOT

- “Ehrlich and Ehrlich’s essay makes many interesting points about the possible collapse of our civilization.”

OR

- “This essay really prompted me to think about how our lifestyles are affecting our modern, technological world.”

but.....

- “While Ehrlich and Ehrlich use good information to support their case, their overall recipe for social change fails to convince sophisticated readers.”

OR

- “Ehrlich and Ehrlich’s socialism-based remedies for a capitalist world make their essay far less convincing to members of the Royal Society than it could have been.”

Remember that a thesis is a **pitch**...

- You have to **convince** your readers to buy it.
- You need to use good *logos, ethos*, and maybe even *pathos* to support your pitch.
- And there has to be **evidence** to back up your points.

WA chs. 11 & 12 are your best resources for making this happen—read them very closely, annotate them, work on them in your thinking notebooks!

The 6 Major Thesis Problems

- Thesis makes no claim
- Thesis is obviously true or a statement of fact
- The thesis sticks to conventional wisdom or doesn't commit.
- The thesis uses personal convictions, not reasoned evaluation, as the basis of its claim
- The thesis covers too much ground.
- The thesis does not express an evaluation of the target argument.

Problem: The thesis makes no claim

- “Ehrlich and Ehrlich have written a fascinating essay on the debate over the survival of our environment.”
OR
- “The Ehrlichs think that modern society is in imminent danger of collapse.”



Solution: Restate the thesis so that we see what issue is to be resolved.

- Make sure your thesis makes a **pitch that can be argued**.
- Instead of using descriptive signals like 'First I will show' or 'fascinating' or vague verbs like 'are seen,' **use evaluative words**: "Ehrlich and Ehrlich persuasively argue that..." or "In an unconvincing analysis, the Ehrlichs claim that..."

Problem: Thesis is obviously true or a statement of fact.

- “Christine Rosen says that we use cell phones because they are convenient and because they make us feel safe.”
- “After reading and analyzing Rosen’s assumptions and observations of cell phone related topics, I agree that there are major issues with people who use these devices excessively.”
- “In my essay I will analyze the claims Rosen makes in her article and then state my case on what I think about it.”

Solution: Rephrase thesis to have an **edge**—something to take issue with.

- A reader will respond to theses like this with “And your point is....?” Think about what **pitch** you are making.
- Use the list of questions on p. 156 of Nosich to help you develop a **specifically EVALUATIVE** pitch.
- Create **tension** within your thesis for best results. (Go back and look at ch 11 of *WA*, esp. page 229 and following!)

Problem: The thesis sticks to conventional wisdom or doesn't commit.

- “Rosen’s argument fails to accommodate the audience, uses foreign examples, and is inaccurate; most readers will not buy her doom and gloom predictions. Despite these failures, Rosen still succeeds in her argument to persuade and inform readers about the dangers and consequences of such reliance on cell phones.”

Solution:

- Remember your task is to evaluate impact of the writer's argument on his/her intended audience.
- Use the steps:
 - Identify the *pitch, moment, and complaint*.
 - **Break it down into its components** (ch. 2 of Nosich) to analyze how well it works.
 - **Read against the grain**. Look for **contradictions, complications, threads** in the argument that will lead you to a fresh perspective rather than to clichés.
 - Then use Nosich 155-56 to do your standards check.

Problem: The thesis uses personal convictions, not reasoned evaluation, as the basis of its claim

- “Rosen starts to force out so much information about cell phones and how they affect people socially, I began to feel that she has a lot of animosity over cell phones stored inside her that she really wants to reveal. She began to state all of the negative aspects about cell phones; while I agree with most of the statements and research she brings forth, she has a personal bias that makes her see cell phones as a villain.”

Solution:

- Unless you know the writer(s) personally and can back up your claims about personal feelings, **stick to analyzing the essay** itself.
- Go back to the questions on p. 155-56 of Nosich to get your essay back on track.

Problem: The thesis covers too much ground.

- “Though Rosen presents many pieces of reasoning that I agree with, the idea that some empowered entity like government needs to step in and make rules to control cell usage is absurd. The concept that Rosen produces for resolving cell phone impoliteness by creating such a control agency or rule of standards implies that as a population we cannot make our own decisions and determine what is right and wrong. It is fair to say, however, that as a society we all have varying degrees of intelligence as well as different standards of right and wrong, but in time a certain courtesy should and will develop among the majority.”

Solution:

- **Narrow** the playing field.
- **Stick to the CAIR standards**—to what extent does the writer's essay meet them?
- Do a **standards check** (Nosich 158 ff.) on your own argument.

Problem: The thesis does not express an evaluation of the target argument.

- “In today’s society, there is a new and growing problem, cell phone etiquette. Just like table manners or public courtesy, cell phone etiquette should be practiced everywhere and all the time.”
- “While reading through Rosen’s piece and reading about all of the statistics, I couldn’t help but think about all of the time and energy that has been devoted to cell phones and other wireless gadgets. To me, all of the time and energy spent is just as bad as our disconnection.”

Solution:

- **Fight the enculturated temptation** to talk *about* the essay (telling what's in it or making a personal response to it).
- Remember that you are expressing **an evaluation** (your own, based on clear standards) **about the effectiveness of the essay on its intended readers**. Don't turn it into what you personally thought about the essay (e.g. that it was hard or used big words or is outside your discipline, etc.)

Remember that SEE-IT helps you evaluate standards.

Rosen fully utilizes language to her advantage; her clear and precise wording exemplifies the extreme concerns she is expressing regarding behavior and appropriateness. This is especially noticeable in her section referring to mental illness and its comparison with cell phone users in public situations. The use of the words *asylum*, *deranged*, and *addled* contribute to a fear of being considered ill and impart anxiety to the audience (38-41). The accompanying tone of alarm in her article adds yet another layer of uncertainty. She strives to convey a feeling of concern for society but one that is cloaked with fear and dismay. Rosen wants us to worry about our cell phone use. Are we being egocentric? Are we behaving oddly by holding a conversation without speaking to everyone around us? As she moves towards her final point, Rosen fosters unease and encourages people to think how they are perceived by those around them, as well as to question whether their phone use is affecting their relationships with the rest of society. She forces her readers to connect the dots between phone use and social interaction.

- **STATE:** Rosen fully utilizes language to her advantage; her clear and precise wording exemplifies the extreme concerns she is expressing regarding behavior and appropriateness.
- **ELABORATE:** This is especially noticeable in her section referring to mental illness and its comparison with cell phone users in public situations... She strives to convey a feeling of concern for society but one that is cloaked with fear and dismay. Rosen wants us to worry about our cell phone use. Are we being egocentric? Are we behaving oddly by holding a conversation without speaking to everyone around us?

- **EXEMPLIFY:** The use of the words *asylum*, *deranged*, and *addled* contribute to a fear of being considered ill and impart anxiety to the audience (38-41). The accompanying tone of alarm in her article adds yet another layer of uncertainty.
- **TIE BACK:** As she moves towards her final point, Rosen fosters unease and encourages people to think how they are perceived by those around them, as well as to question whether their phone use is affecting their relationships with the rest of society. She forces her readers to connect the dots between phone use and social interaction.

What's missing in this ¶ ?

There's no disputing the fact that people will always use cell phones to communicate, but it's worth arguing whether they are being used more to isolate individuals from society. Rosen believes that use of the devices is disconnecting society as much as they are connecting us individually (Rosen 1). She goes on to say that cell phones radically disengage consumers from the public (Rosen 1, 8). She states that Americans spend an average of about seven hours a month talking on their cell phones (Rosen 1). Even though this equates to a mere 24 minutes a day, this is enough time to form and solidify a bond.

What's missing in this ¶ ?

A filter for Rosen might be that she is, in fact, very educated. Her education acts as both a way of giving her information on the damages cell phone technology can cause to a social situation, and at the same time the basic means by which she received her education, since it uses some of the same technology, which contradicts and creates arguments against it. However, this does not affect her final conclusion greatly. A bigger barrier to her thinking is that since her field of expertise is based on peoples' interactions and changes in society's ethical code, she is greatly concerned with other peoples' experiences and opinions. This barrier affects Rosen's reasoning and her overall conclusions significantly because it is for exactly these people that she is writing.

What's missing in this ¶ ?

Rosen did use accurate information when she made a good point about cell phones and the dangerous situations they create when used by drivers of automobiles. It is possible that more car accidents are occurring because of cell phone use in cars.

However, while Rosen gives information about the percentage of people that use cell phones in cars, she fails to mention the percentage of car accidents that are caused because of people on their cell phones. Rosen just assumes that her readers will connect more drivers on cell phones with more car accidents. It would have improved her *logos* had she included a statistic on car accidents that involved cell phones.

Remember...

- Hold yourself to the same standards you hold the essay to; this creates YOUR ethos as an evaluator. Do a standards check on your own work.
- Perform a SEE-IT test for each section of your essay.
- Ask yourself what threads and strands of ideas run through your argument. Sometimes it helps to make an **outline at the rough draft stage** to see if things need to be shifted.
- Remember *Writing Analytically*.
 - What psychological organization are you using? (p. 323 ff.)
 - How are you conveying your ethos? (p. 329 ff.)
 - How are you conveying logos? (pp. 74-75)
 - If you are using pathos, where and how well?