Assessing the Writing Situation and Developing a Thesis Statement

SOAP: Subject, Occasion, Audience, Purpose

Checklist for Assessing the Writing Situation:

Subject
- Is your subject self-generated, or provided?
- Why is your subject worth writing about?
- How broad or narrow should your subject be?
- How detailed should your coverage be?

Sources of Information
- Where will your information come from?
- What sort of documentation is required?

Purpose
- Why are you writing? Is your purpose to inform, persuade, entertain, call to action, etc?

Audience
- Who are your readers?
- How well-informed are they on the topic?
- What do you want them to learn about the topic?
- How interested and attentive are they likely to be?
- Will they be resistant to or skeptical of your ideas?
- What is your relationship to them?
- How much time are they willing to spend reading?
- How sophisticated are they as readers?

Length, Document Design, and Deadlines
- What are your length specifications?
- Is there a specified or expected document design or format?
- Who will review your draft in progress?
- What are your deadlines? How much time do you have to complete the project?

A Thesis Can Surprise by Doing the Following:
- Giving the reader new information or clarifying something confusing
- Posing a dilemma by juxtaposing two or more solutions, finding paradoxes, etc.
- Identifying an unexpected effect, implication, or significance of something
- Showing underlying differences between two concepts normally thought to be similar or underlying similarities between two concepts normally thought to be different
- Showing that a commonly accepted answer to a question isn’t satisfactory or complete
- Opposing a commonly accepted viewpoint, supporting an unpopular viewpoint, or otherwise taking an argumentative stance on something
- Providing a new solution for a problem
Giving your Thesis Tension:
Ways to Change your Reader’s View of your Subject:

“Before reading my essay, my readers think this way about my topic:
__________________________________________________________.”

“After reading my essay, my readers will think this different way about my topic:
__________________________________________________________.”

Question:
What effect has the telephone had on our culture?
Thesis without Tension:
The invention of the telephone has brought many advantages to our culture.
Thesis with Tension:
Although the telephone has brought many advantages to our culture, it may have contributed to the increase of violence in our society.

Question:
Do reservations serve a useful role in contemporary Native American culture?
Thesis without Tension:
Reservations have good points and bad points.
Thesis with Tension:
Although many Native Americans believe that reservations are necessary to preserve their culture and heritage, the continuation of reservations actually degrades Native American culture and contributes to increased poverty rates among Native Americans.

Revising Thesis Sentences:
In small groups, rewrite the following thesis sentences to make them specific, limited, narrow, unified, and risky.

1) Many people believe that baseball players have no right to strike.
2) The government owes a college education to every citizen who wants one.
3) The hunting of wild animals, as long as they are not in danger of extinction, can actually help nature.
4) Travel to foreign countries is educational.
5) Silence is the best response to anger.

(The supplemental information on these two pages was obtained from The Allyn and Bacon Guide to Writing, by Ramage and Bean, The Little, Brown Handbook, Sixth Edition, and The Little, Brown Workbook.)