

## Transcript for “Episode 7. How to Write a Thesis Statement”

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Belle: Every writer has a different process for starting out their writing, right, and how they come up with their thesis. So tell me about yours. What do you like to do?

Drew: Mine starts with a piece of gum, actually.

Belle: Really?

Drew: Yeah... So, I'm making up a word that I'm going to mess with later in the paper. I can do that because I'm a doctor. Right?

Drew: I'm Dr. Andrew Koke, I'm an advisor for the College of Arts and Sciences, and I used to work for Writing Tutorial Services.

Kate: I'm Kate Goldstein. I'm a Ph.D. candidate in the English department and I used to work for Writing Tutorial Services as well.

Belle: Hi, I'm Belle Kim. I'm a recent graduate of the English department and I, too, work for Writing Tutorial Services.

Drew: Alright, so Kate here we are on location in beautiful Dunn Woods and you've brought us here because this has something to do with the thesis. Can you explain that to me please?

Kate: Sure, so this is going to be our metaphor for our thesis statement. I want you to think of the landscape as the topic, alright, from the Greek *topos*, so all of this behind us. And our thesis statement is the path through the woods, right? So "thesis" is from the Greek, a setting down, a pathway. And when we write a thesis statement, what we're actually doing is taking our reader on a journey. We're explaining to them what the evidence means and we're arriving somewhere different at the end.

Drew: Alright, so we're in this place and the path is like our thesis, and just like there are many paths, I imagine there are many types of theses. But a good thesis can be distilled down into three qualities. Belle, what are those qualities?

Belle: Right, so at Writing Tutorial Services we look for three qualities in a really strong thesis. So, first, it has to be a subject that reasonable people could disagree about. Second, it has to have

one main argument or perspective that it's advancing. And third, it has to be doable within the context of the assignment.

Drew: So I imagine that a lot of students show up at Writing Tutorial Services to work on their thesis, but WTS does a lot more than that right?

Belle: Yeah, we help students at every stage of the writing process. So, we help with brainstorming, with outlining, with coming up with sources, citing things, providing evidence, basically every step of the way we're here for you.

Drew: Alright, so fantastic! Now then, let's see where this path is going to take us.

### Part 1: The Challenge

Belle: So here we are in front of these really cool Adam and Eve statues. Why don't you guys tell me what are some of things you notice about them?

Drew: How small they are for what you would expect from Adam and Eve.

Kate: They look like adults physically, but look how much shorter they are than us as average adults. So there's something oddly child-like when we're standing next to them.

Belle: They're completely equal in size. Adam is no more masculine or intimidating than Eve is.

Kate: Right, right, so there's a physical mirroring here. They're physically the same height, they kind of have the same posture. If you look at their hands, if you look at their feet, one in front of the other, that they're very, very equal.

Drew: And there are some pieces missing here. If this is a Garden of Eden scene, we might expect to see either a forbidden fruit or perhaps a serpent. And that's missing.

Kate: Right, but what is here is the garden. So if you look behind us, Dunn Woods has now transformed into Eden. But the weird part is that on the other side where you can't see are some of the older campus buildings. That one's got 1894 on the building. So here's our big symbol of knowledge in front of us (which is supposed to be bad in the Garden of Eden). Here we have Adam and Eve with no sign of sin, and behind us is the forest, or Eden.

Drew: That's really interesting.

Belle: Yeah, so this is obviously an example of a subject in which reasonable people could disagree about. There could be many interpretations to the meaning behind these statues, why they're here, all sorts of things like that. So, then, given the context of what we've been discussing so far, I have a task for you. What if you guys were to try and write a thesis statement based off of these statues and write a five page paper out of it?

Kate: Okay.

Belle: You think you're up to the task?

Kate: Yeah.

Drew: Well, hold on. Do I have to write the five page paper or just the thesis?

Belle: OK fine, you can just write the thesis!

Drew: Alright, I'm up for it.

Belle: Okay, let's do it.

## Part 2: Kate's Thesis

Belle: Okay, so you have a blank document pulled up now. So tell me, kind of, what are you going to do to get started when you formulate your thesis?

Kate: Okay, so I think this is a really hard part because we know that we're supposed to get a thesis statement, and that that is, like, the gold medal that we need to get to to be able to write a paper. But how you get there is actually really difficult. And I think a lot of people don't know what to do, and that's part of the process. Part of the process is not knowing where you're going to end up. So I like to start with kind of giving myself a task, and I'm going to do that by just creating a title and just say "Adam and Eve Statue Observations." So I don't even need to come up right now with an argument. You just can't just snap your fingers and get an argument. You really have to kind of think about it, and play with it, and try stuff, and get rid of it, and try it again. That's the way it is. It's organic. You have to feel your way into it.

Belle: Right, so you're just going to make a list of the evidences and things that you noticed about the statue?

Kate: Yeah, and you really can't skip this stuff. It sometimes feels basic and too basic to start by writing down your observations, but that's foundational. You have to do that to get anywhere,

and when you make your argument it's going to be based on that evidence, so it's gotta go down there. Something else that was really interesting to me was what wasn't there since Adam and Eve is such, kind of, a loaded topic. We have certain expectations, so... there's no apple. There's no serpent. And with that, and I'm really interested in the equality here, there's no sense that Eve did something bad first. The things that are missing are, first of all, the things that would trigger Eve to be the one maybe initiating it. And the other thing is that maybe this isn't about that moment. It's not about the moment of that sin or fall or the apple. But the thing that I'm really hung up on that I haven't typed yet is that context-wise, it's on a college campus. We're here for knowledge, we're here to learn. We're here in some ways to break with our parents. So I think some of what's going on in this statue is really also about knowledge. So if we're thinking about that, going back to what I said before, it's between the woods and the campus buildings. So it's between, let me add on here... Maybe we can think of it as "between Eden and knowledge."

Belle: That's a really good point.

Kate: And in that border territory, if we think about knowledge as, normally, the fall of man and a disobedience of man and the traditional story of Adam and Eve, you wouldn't want to say that on a college campus. You wouldn't want to say the more knowledge you get, the worse you are! This is a different kind of narrative, and I think there's something here about, maybe, human seeking. Like maybe it's about the pursuit of knowledge.

How do I work this thing about knowledge into a thesis? I usually do it myself by trying out a bunch of phrases and then kind of cobbling together a working thesis from those ideas, understanding that it's rough and that it's naturally going to change. I'm going to try and make a sentence. I might revise it a couple times. "The Adam and Eve statue seems to be..."

And we also think about the fact that the context of the Adam and Eve statue on a college campus. So let me see if I can bring this stuff together without making, like, a giant Franken-sentence that's, you know, five, six, seven lines long - which was a problem I had in my writing, definitely, when I was a college student; was having, like, "Let's just put it all together with some glue and some semicolons." ...

And I'm going to say "In the border space" (because that's something we've been saying) - "In the border space between classrooms and Dunn Woods." Okay, "The Adam and Even statue, in the border space between classrooms and Dunn Woods seems to slyly reference the transition from child to adult, from innocence to experience that we associate with college."

Belle: Well, this sounds like it's going to be a very interesting paper.

Kate: Great, so hopefully you won't make me write the paper!

### Part 3: Drew's Thesis

Drew: It's about impossible to write the opening when you don't know exactly how everything is going to go. And so what I've learned to do there as well is to just start with some observations that I'm going to work with. If it's Adam and Eve, and we'll assume that it is, then we might expect to see a serpent. We might expect to see an apple or some kind of fruit... So really, this is kind of a list of what's missing.

Belle: Yeah, so that's really interesting that you started out with something that's missing as opposed to what you already see. Why did you choose to do that?

Drew: Well, that's what abundantly struck me about that piece was... I'm used to seeing certain things in an Adam and Eve piece, and they're missing. "Although the sculpture appears to be Adam and Eve..." Might even say "several elements"... "actually about." Now here, I have to make a claim. We've got what's missing, but what's present? And what's present is equality, which is really peculiar. And that makes me think that this sculpture is really about gender equality. That's the claim I'm gonna make.

Belle: Okay, great.

Drew: Now then, I finished the first draft of the thesis. Now then, what I could do is, if I wanted to, I could actually pick a couple of the elements and say specifically what they are. "The lack of the serpent and the fruit, the lack of perfection, and the similarity in size suggests"...

I've got a lot of "what" in here. I've got this entire series; these three things are really the "what." And it minimalizes the tiny little moment where I am trying to suggest the "why": gender equality.

Belle: So if you want to emphasize the gender equality and you want to lead with that...

Drew: Mmhmm.

Belle: ...then how would you go about rephrasing this thesis?

Drew: It's a great question.

Belle: And this is kind of what the writing process is like for most students, right? You know, they get these ideas, and then they have to kind of sit and think about what it is that they want to do.

Drew: Okay, so now then, I've kind of reordered it and I've started to work with something here. I don't really like this yet, but I'm getting close. The stark similarity in size between the two statues impresses upon the viewer the necessity of gender equality. Now the thing that I don't like about it is I'm once again ending with gender equality.

Belle: Right. And also when you say two statues, right, you're not specifying that they're supposed to be Adam and Eve. So that's also something you could be more specific with, right?

Drew: Yeah, I could. I could mention that this is specifically Adam and Eve. And the reason that I didn't is because the "what's missing" makes me think that it was purposefully not supposed to be exactly Adam and Eve, but also the artist does enough of the trope to make you know that it's Adam and Eve. You know what I mean? The artist is walking a very fine line here.

"This is not your usual Adam and Eve. These two are equal, they are involved, they are unfallen. The artist is suggesting that it is not paradise that made them perfect, but their equality, their giving, their synergy; it is these things that made them perfect." Now that's starting to be really interesting, and it also has expanded beyond just simply their similarity in size. It allows me to bring in the fact that they're gesturing towards one another, that their eyes are locked, that the two seem to be a pair. That even though they're separated by four or five feet, nevertheless, they're undivided. So what if the thesis is actually about how the perfect humans are those that are in harmony and equality?

I can't say what the artist is saying, but I could say the statue is indicating that the perfect humans are those who are in harmony and equality. And that, I think, is my thesis.

Belle: Great, yeah. It's something that's an argument, something that you can prove, something you have evidence to support. So, looks like a great thesis to me.

#### Part 4: Discussion, Take-Aways, & Credits

Belle: So now that we've finished looking at the theses, let's kind of talk about what we noticed.

Drew: Well, right off the bat you notice that both Kate and I began with these observations about the piece itself, and we actually listed them out.

Kate: I think that that's something that a lot of people feel like they should skip. It's too simple, it's too basic, I don't need to write down the evidence, I have it in my head. But it's better if you think about this as not simple but foundational. Without a foundation you cannot build a house,

you cannot build a building. This is the foundation of your paper. You need to get these things down on paper so that you can work with them.

Drew: And they lend themselves eventually to the evidence that you're going to put in the paper itself.

Kate: Right.

Belle: Yeah, and it's also interesting to note that you guys both were working with concrete evidence and you listed similar things, and yet you came up with very different interpretations, right? So that suggests there's no right or wrong answer. There are multiple interpretations to every kind of text or source that you look at.

Drew: Yeah, I think that's right. There are multiple, possible good answers, and then there are some that are really great answers. And that's what we need to strive for. One of the things that separates the good from the great, I think, is this word-smithing that you and I did towards the end. Once we had an idea of what our thesis was going to be, we actually spent time, significant time, thinking about the actual words we wanted.

Kate: Right, and that difference between just taking the first idea that works and really revising the idea, and the language of the idea, which is something we both went through looking at this, that's what makes it an excellent paper. That's what moves you up in the world in paper-writing once you have a functional idea. And that's also a sign that your thesis is evolving. It's okay to arrive at that slightly different place.

Belle: Yeah, neither of you guys got really fixated on whatever it was that you initially started with. You know, you were willing to kind of go further, push your ideas until you had a thesis that you really wanted and an argument that you really liked. So that's another key thing to think about when you're writing a paper.

Drew: So Kate, about how long did it take you to come up with this thesis?

Kate: This was a thirty minute process. So you're gonna see it cut down really quickly, and we knew we were doing this, and, you know, all the things that should have made this go really fast. You can't skip the thinking. No matter how much you think you can skip it or how prepared you are. That is the thinking. It's going to be a huge part of the time and effort you put into the paper, and if you skip that you can't write a good paper.

Drew: I agree. Mine was about a half-hour as well. And you and I have written quite a few theses in our time. Okay, so, great work, Kate. It looks fantastic. And thanks, Belle, for leading us through this Writing Tutorial Services document.

Belle: Yeah, and just to wrap up everything, I think it's really cool that both of you guys produced theses that meet the three requirements that we have for a good thesis. You guys present an argument that reasonable people could disagree about. You do this in the context of the assignment, so within a five page paper. And it's a clear argument and a perspective that you guys are advocating. So, great job everyone!

Drew: Thanks!

Kate: Thanks, Belle.

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