

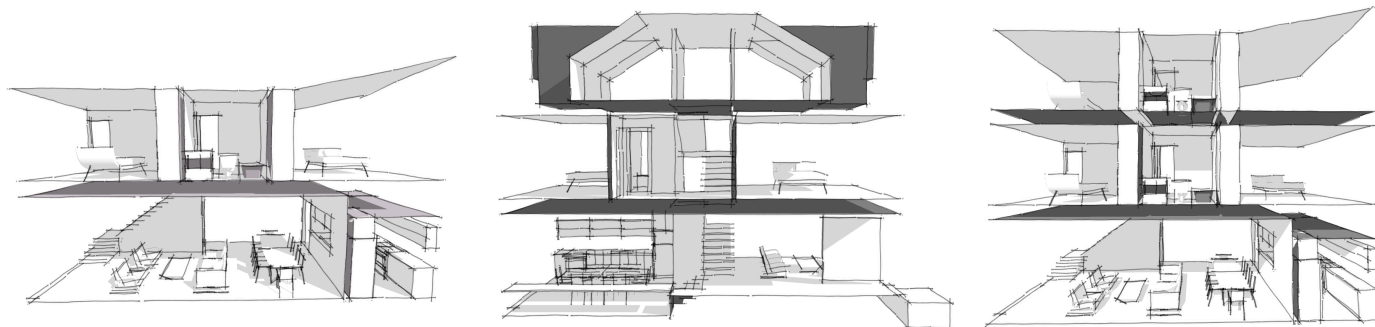
Use this handout if your paper is too short, if your professor often tells you to "go deeper," or if you feel the argument lacks complexity.

The Three-Story Thesis

Too often, we think of a thesis statement as a single sentence that makes a stark, standalone

declaration. In truth, a strong thesis statement often has multiple layers or several interconnected steps. These layers or steps can be expressed in separate sentences, meaning your overall thesis may take 3 - 4 sentences to articulate.

It can help to think of your thesis as a house with different stories. The first floor is the most basic; the second floor adds some detail and color, and the third floor is the most abstract and far-reaching in its implications. See the examples below for a fuller explanation. And, in particular, if your essays are frequently too short - or if you just feel that your argument lacks force and power - then pay attention to that "third story." The third story is what often makes the difference between a paper that is fine and a paper that has a wow-factor.



First Floor: Describes the topic; gives the facts; makes an observation. This level of thesis makes observations that are non-controversial. That is, no reasonable person would disagree with them. A person reading such a thesis immediately thinks: "Yes, that's true." A one-story thesis statement **will not contain** a worthwhile gift for your reader.

- **Example:** "Kiltartan Legend" is a complex poem that depicts Penelope waiting for Odysseus to come home.
- **Example:** Though the chorus remains loyal to Oedipus throughout the first half of the drama, it eventually becomes convinced that he is the reason for the Theban plague.

Stuck with a one-story thesis statement? Turn it into a two-story thesis by asking John Trimble's three "critical analysis" questions of your first-story facts: Why? How? To what effect?

Second Floor: Interprets, gives a point of view on, and/or adds controversy to the facts of the first floor. "Adding controversy" means the thesis offers an interpretation of the facts that may not be obvious to the reader. A person reading a two-story thesis thinks: "That's an interesting idea; now prove it to me." A "controversial" thesis does not mean an absurd or idiosyncratic thesis. It means you take one position or argue for one interpretation out of a number of possible positions/interpretations. A two-story thesis statement **has the potential** to offer your reader a valuable gift.

- **Example:** In its depiction of Penelope waiting for Odysseus, "Kiltartan Legend" suggests that Penelope is emotionally ambivalent about her husband's return and resistant to typical sexual roles.

Adapted from Professor Trisha Tucker et al, “Building a ‘Three-Story’ Thesis Statement”

- **Example:** The chorus is vital to the audience’s understanding of *Oedipus Rex*, as the chorus tricks the audience into accepting Oedipus’s guilt without real proof.

*Stuck with a two-story thesis statement? Turn it into a three-story thesis by asking: **So what? What are the implications of the things I am analyzing or my interpretation of those things?***

Third Floor: Relates the two-story thesis to the bigger picture, explains its significance, sets it in a new context. You might also find it helpful to think of the third floor as the significant conclusion toward which your entire paper is moving. This is the most difficult type of thesis to describe—and write—because it can take many forms. A third-floor thesis opens out to a wider view. Or, think of it as the answer you get when you ask of a second-floor thesis, “So what?” You want the reader to say, “OK, I see why this argument matters.” A third-floor thesis runs the risk of being too ambitious, but it is also the most compelling kind of thesis you can write and has the potential to offer your reader the biggest gift.

- **Example:** “Kiltartan Legend” introduces into the relationship between Penelope and Odysseus the question of sexual appetite and desire. This introduction not only suggests an ambivalence in Penelope’s emotional response to her husband’s return, but also sheds new light on the physical experience of gender for women within the domestic sphere.
- **Example:** Despite repeated assertions that Laius was slain by many men rather than one, and despite its own doubts about the trustworthiness of Tiresias’s accusations, the chorus becomes inexorably convinced of Oedipus’s guilt. Watching the drama, we may be tempted to view the chorus’s growing disillusionment with Oedipus as a model for our own response, but to do so would misread the chorus’s function—and the drama itself. By noticing how unwarranted the chorus’s loss of faith in Oedipus is, we can see that *Oedipus Rex* critiques the process by which an arbitrary fiction comes to assume the value of truth.

Note that each floor depends upon the one below it, just as, when building a house, you can’t have a second floor without a first, or a third without a second. Be mindful of the thesis statements you construct. You should strive to build complex, compelling, and “controversial” thesis statements. But if you want to take your readers up to the third floor, make sure you give them a solid foundation.