Thesis Construction

Settling on a driving interpretive question or “problem”:
As we have been discussing, questions serve to unlock important clues in your discovery of a text’s meaning(s). Ideally, these questions enable you to increase the level of specificity in your understanding of a work as you foray new dimensions of analytical inquiry. As you begin writing toward a particular assignment, you want to ask yourself increasingly focused, theoretical questions in search of a well-sized driving and provocative question or “problem” (as in something about the text that is puzzling or problematic and warrants exploration and explanation). This driving question or “problem” should sustain a paper of the required length, intrigue you personally, and move you from a more “obvious” to more complex examination of the story, poem, or play at hand.

Responding to your question:
You will present the driving question in your paper in the form of the thesis or thesis statement (found in the academic essay, it consists of one or more sentences that attempt to establish the writer’s main idea, purpose, problem, or question). Your thesis comprises your way of viewing, reading, and interpreting a text. Keep the following protocols in mind when you work toward developing a thesis:

- Your thesis should be both clear and specific: A reader who is familiar with the story, poem, or play you are writing about (and it is fair to assume a basic familiarity) should have a good sense of what your thesis means and how it relates to the literature.

- Your thesis should be relevant: not every paper is going to change lives or minds, of course, but you should at least state your thesis in such a way that your reader won’t have the most dreaded question, “Who cares?”

- Your thesis should be debatable: Your thesis should not be obvious in the text. It must be arguable. If your topic is already obvious, then you have a statement of fact or plot instead of an assertion or way of reading the text that you must support.

- Your thesis should be original: Originality doesn’t imply that every thesis you write must be a brilliant gem that nobody but you could have discovered. But it should be something you have thought about independently, it should avoid clichés, contain something of you, and do more than parrot back something said in your class or written in a textbook.

- You should be able to state your thesis as a complete sentence: This sentence, generally referred to as the thesis statement, should first identify your topic and then make a claim about it—why is it significant. (Occasionally, especially for longer papers with more complex ideas behind them, you will need more than one sentence to state your thesis clearly).

- Your thesis should be appropriate to the assignment: This may seem obvious, but as we work with literature, taking notes, asking questions, and beginning to think about your
queries and theses, it is possible to lose sight of the assignment as it was presented. After you have come up with a tentative thesis, it’s a good idea to go back and review the assignment as your instructor gave it, making sure your paper will fulfill its requirements.

“The word tentative is important. As you start to gather support and write your paper, your thesis will help you focus clearly on your task and sort out which of your ideas, observations, and questions are relevant to the project at hand. But you should keep an open mind as well, realizing that your thesis is likely to evolve as you write. You are likely to change the focus in subtle or not so subtle ways, and it’s even possible that you will change your mind completely as you write and therefore need to create a new thesis from scratch. If this happens, don’t regard it as a failure. On the contrary, it means you have succeeded in learning something genuine from the experience of writing, and that is what a literature class is all about” (Gardner 17-18).

- There is no simple formula for developing a thesis. Everyone may take a different approach. Understand, however, that thesis development is a discovery process. You may write three pages of rough draft and discover the thesis on page 3! Just be open to the process, unruly and time-demanding as it is. Here’s process that works for me:

1) Locate something in the text that puzzles or intrigues you and formulate a question. Remember, the question should “theoretical,” as in something that warrants further investigation and renders the possibility of complexity and a wealth of interpretation (you can’t go wrong with “why” and “how” questions). The question should be appropriate to the assignment and its length requirement.

2) With that question in mind, revisit the text. Perform a close textual reading of places that “speak to” your question. If you are writing a research paper, you would also want to consult secondary sources with your question in mind. Take copious notes: write down explanatory remarks and continue to ask questions (you may find that your question leads to another, entirely new and more intriguing question or that your question intersects with other connecting ones). Don’t limit your focus just yet—play out multiple possibilities and continue to embrace the process of inquiry.

3) You should be able to locate patterns of meaning as you revisit the text. These patterns of meaning will tell you something about your question(s). Look for the “glue” that ties all this together.

4) Now, answer your question. If your question(s) is/are truly compelling, you’ll find that your answer is not simplistic, surface-level or one-dimensional. It should yield multiple possibilities for interpretation and provide rich soil for analytical investigation.

5) When you answer your question, you have a tentative thesis. By tentative I mean work-in-progress.

6) Revise! Keep the ever-questioning mentality alive and be open to new prospects as you continue to write and think through the terms of your thesis.
**STUDENT EXAMPLE: A Driving Question or “Problem”**

The “problem”: The trope of the mother as an archetypal figure for all that is nurturing, caring, and loving is everywhere in literature. In Toni Morrison’s *Sula*, however, mothers are portrayed in a radically different light! Eva burns and kills her own son, Plum, Hannah “likes” her daughter but does not “love her, etc. Most intriguing, though, is that the narrator doesn’t condemn these acts but portrays them as paradoxically “loving” acts. The driving question: why does Morrison complicate our view of the mother figure in the text *Sula*? Is it possible that “mother love” is much more complex in reality than what our archetypal notions encompass?

**SAMPLE: Introduction and Thesis (thesis idea underlined in the text)**

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**Mother**

It has been said that something goes missing in an individual if one’s relationship with their mother is askew. In her novel, *Sula*, Toni Morrison explores the enigmatic aspects of motherhood. She acknowledges those characteristics of mothers that are not written about in greeting cards. Morrison deliberately depicts a much more complicated version of the relationship between a mother and her offspring. She reveals both the amazing heights and awful depths of her love. She shows that its real nature includes both altruism and self-interest. Her telling of this mother love challenges the traditional sweet, gentle, care giving role most often assigned to the nurturing soul called Mother. In fact, Morrison’s mothers do not conform to any specified standard of behavior. They themselves are the products of imperfect mothers’ doubts and fears, and oftentimes their expressions of love are misunderstood by the very ones they cherish. **Toni Morrison breaks with the typical expectations surrounding the mother figure in order to refashion the archetype.** Morrison’s portrayal certainly provides her readers with a fuller picture of a mother with a hint of suggestion for them to embrace the whole.
These guidelines are taken directly from Janet E. Gardner’s *Writing About Literature*, pgs. 16-17.