

Tips for Thesis Papers

Your goal is to determine and present the overall thesis (major argument or conclusion) of your book.

σ Be careful not to confuse the book's THESIS with its TOPIC.

A book may be about the Populist party (TOPIC), but it goes beyond that and asserts an interpretation of (or argument about) the party (THESIS).

σ A book may have a complex thesis of multiple parts.

If so, and as much as possible, summarize and present the overall thesis, not just one of its parts.

If the author of the book were reading your paper, would he/she be satisfied? Would he/she believe that you understood the book's essential, central argument? Or would he/she say, "Well, it's okay but what about?"

σ The author spends 200-300 pages presenting his/her thesis; you have only 1 page to present it. Thus, you must have as good a handle on the book's major arguments and key pieces of evidence as possible. If you do not, you will not be able to be thorough yet brief.

Essential to a good understanding of a book (for both discussion and paper) is careful reading of its "front matter," i.e., foreword/introduction/preface. Many authors explicitly state their thesis and major arguments (as well as, sometimes, organization, motivations, and sources) before they move to the details.

σ While student papers are short and thus have short (often 1-2 sentences) thesis statements, books might spend pages stating (and explaining) their theses. So, your book may not have a magic, single-sentence statement of its thesis. In some cases, you might have to read the entire book before understanding its thesis.