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21L.001 Foundations of Western Culture: Homer to Dante  
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## Good Theses, Fruit Papers, and Other Crucial Issues

A fruit paper is my term for an essay whose thesis is so simplistic that the body paragraphs could be rearranged, put in any order without damage to the argument as a whole. For example:

Thesis: Throughout human history, there have been many kinds of fruit.”

Body paragraph 1: “Apples are a kind of fruit.”

Body paragraph 2: “Bananas are also a kind of fruit.”

Body paragraph 3: “In addition, we can see that cherries are a kind of fruit.”

Conclusion: “In conclusion, there are many kinds of fruit.”

This is a facetious example, of course, but the issue – the fact that you could put the body paragraphs in any order, or indeed omit any of them, without affecting the thesis as a whole – afflicts many papers. If you find that you can rearrange your body paragraphs substantially with minimal loss of sense, your thesis probably isn’t strong enough. This of course raises that other crucial issue: what constitutes a strong thesis?

Please note that I do not use the term “thesis statement.” The thesis of an essay does not need to be contained wholly within a single sentence. Indeed, strong theses often cannot be so contained. That is because they will often involve both an element of *contrast* (i.e., while X is superficially the case, upon closer inspection we find Y instead; early on, the sea is depicted as a frighteningly alien character, but over the course of the poem, the sea is increasingly depicted as a refuge; precisely because Ovid generally maintains an adversarial stance toward Virgil, his relatively few lapses into apparently sincere reverence are particularly significant); and a gesture toward the larger significance of this contrast. Indeed, while good theses *can* take nearly any form, it may be helpful to think about yours in the following terms to see if you are arguing with enough complexity: “Although X is usually (or superficially) true, it is sometimes (or actually) the case that Y. Some aspect of this suggests Z about Text(s)/Author(s)/Character(s)/Images(s) A (and B).” These specific words wouldn’t necessarily need to arise, but check to see if their structural function is being filled. For example:

Rochester represents himself as participating enthusiastically in the sexual debauchery of his period; both his exploits and the graphic vulgarity with which he depicts them are superlative. Yet below the surface lurks a paradox, for his most stunning successes occur only when he is emotionally uninvolved; on the rare (and therefore the more significant) instances when his heart is involved, he all too often falls short of his goals. Taken as a whole, then, his corpus suggests that the preening machismo that he himself cultivates is a cruel hoax, setting him up for sexual failure and emotional distress at precisely the moments that he most earnestly desires the fulfilment of both.