

Something Worth Arguing About

The typical ACT reading passage will contain a thesis statement, usually in the first paragraph. The thesis statement will let the reader know, as soon as possible, what argument the passage will make. Identifying this thesis statement is the most important reading task you have.

A thesis is the largest, broadest statement in the passage. It should have these three characteristics:

1. It is something worth arguing about. There is no point in basing a passage on a thesis that is obvious to everyone or that isn't concerned with a significant issue. Read the statement you identify as the thesis, and ask yourself, "So what?" If you can't answer that question, you probably haven't found the true thesis.
2. It is precise. It is not something anyone has trouble understanding and is not so general that it fails to represent a strong position.
3. It is supported by the rest of the passage; it isn't just a springboard that allows the writer to jump into topics having little to do with the thesis.

Let's try that test on the following passage, taken from a *Smithsonian* article by Andrew Curry on the first human flight, that of the Wright brothers at Kitty Hawk in 1903:

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As an Air Force test pilot, Lt. Col. Dawn Dunlop has flown dozens of different airplanes, from the nimble F-1 SE Strike Eagle fighter to the massive C-17 transport jet to the Russian MIG-21. Stationed at Edwards Air Force Base, she's part of the elite squadron that is putting the cutting-edge F/A-22 Raptor, a jet fighter, through its paces. But the aircraft that Dunlop has had the toughest time controlling was a replica of the Wright brothers' glider. More than once she crash-landed the muslin-skinned craft on to the windswept sands of Kitty Hawk, North Carolina. "It was a real eye-opener," Dunlop recalls of the (bruising) experience last year, part of a commemorative Air Force program. "They've made it so simple to fly today we've forgotten how difficult it was back then."

In this passage, the writer introduces us to an Air Force test pilot, someone who has flown the world's most advanced and sophisticated aircraft. And yet, it turns out, the toughest plane she ever flew was a replica of the Wright brothers' glider. That background, which provides a useful context for the reader, prepares us for the thesis statement—the last sentence in the paragraph. We could paraphrase it like this: "Flying seems simple today, so simple we have forgotten how difficult it was in the beginning of human flight." Does that sentence meet our test?

1. **Is it worth arguing about?** Certainly. The magazine's blurb reinforces the thesis this way: "From the Wright brothers' breakthrough 100 years ago to the latest robot jets, the past century has been shaped by the men and women who got us off the ground." Reviewing the story of the Wright brothers will help us put modern aviation progress in perspective.
2. **Is it precise?** "Back then" in the thesis refers specifically to the Wright brothers and their famous flight in December 1903.

3. Is it supported by the passage? Some of the references in the passage to modern aircraft seem at first glance to be off target. But on further reflection, it's clear that they provide a useful contrast to the simplicity of that first flight.

Here's one final test: a good thesis answers a question. What that question is, however, is something you'll have to figure out. In this case, the question might be: why is the Wright brothers' flight significant today? If the thesis statement you've identified in an ACT passage can be viewed as an answer to a question the writer wanted to ask, you have probably zeroed in on just the right sentence.