From Subject to Thesis

Usually your instructor will assign a broad subject for a term paper or essay. For example:

*The role of mitochondria in obesity*

*Discrimination against Japanese Americans during World War II*

*The uses of horror in the short stories of Nathaniel Hawthorne and Edgar Allen Poe*

Within this broad subject, you need to define a specific topic. Obviously, the narrowness or breadth of this topic will depend on the length of the essay or paper you are expected to write. As Professor Frederick Crews points out in *The Random House Handbook*, one way to define a topic is to pose a question about the general subject. But not any question will do. For this purpose, questions headed by *How* or *Why* are preferable to yes-no questions or questions headed by *Who*, *What*, *Where*, or *When*. The logic here is that *How* and *Why* questions are more likely to lead you to an integrated and coherent answer; the other questions are more likely to prompt you to merely recite a list of discrete items.

Your answer to your topic question will provide the thesis statement for your essay. For example:

**Subject**  
The role of mitochondria in obesity

**Topic question**  
How do mitochondria control weight?

**Thesis**  
By regulating the rate at which cells metabolize fats, mitochondria play an important role in controlling body weight.

**Subject**  
Discrimination against Japanese Americans during World War II

**Topic question**  
Why did government officials allow discrimination against Japanese Americans?

**Thesis**  
Government officials allowed discrimination against Japanese Americans not because it was in the nation's interest but because it provided a concrete enemy for people to focus on.

**Subject**  
The uses of horror in the short stories of Nathaniel Hawthorne and Edgar Allen Poe

**Topic question**  
How do Hawthorne and Poe achieve similar Gothic effects in spite of using radically different subjects?

**Thesis**  
Although their subjects are different, Hawthorne and Poe achieve similar Gothic effects by delving into the psyches of the characters rather than relying on cheap horror tricks.

In general, a thesis should be written in the active voice (not the passive) and should contain concrete nouns (rather than abstract concepts). In drafting your thesis, you may find it helpful to construct a phrase that includes the word because. Whether or not this because phrase appears in your final thesis, writing such a phrase will encourage you to summarize your reasoning while you are working on your essay.