You have probably had an English teacher ask you “where’s your thesis?” When a teacher asks this question, what he or she is really asking is “what is the answer to your question at issue.” For example, if we look again at the hypothetical discussion about the English Only Law, we can see that there is question at issue: Does the benefit from the tax savings generated by the English Only Law outweigh the social cost? We also know that this question came from a real point of stasis--disagreement over the effectiveness of the law. If you were writing a paper in response to this question, your thesis would be your answer to this question stated as an assertion. “The English Only Law is a bad idea” could be a thesis. It is an answer to a question that is at issue for a discourse community--an answer stated as an assertion. It is also the main claim of your paper.

We are getting a little ahead of ourselves, however. How did we come up with this answer? Did we just pull it out of the air? If we did just pull it out of the air we aren’t conducting real inquiry. Conducting real inquiry is difficult and comes after we have decided on the question at issue that we will answer. As noted earlier, we then must pursue that question by reading, talking to others, maybe going to the library. And only after we have looked at the reasons available, can we attempt to answer the question, and that answer will be our thesis.

So, after real inquiry, if our thesis is “the English Only Law is a bad idea” what is the next step? If I were reading this thesis, especially if I were on the other side of the point of stasis raised in the classroom, my first question would be why? Why is the English Only Law a bad idea? As a writer, your essay should answer this question, but where do you begin? You need to begin by identifying your main reason and pairing it with your thesis. “Utah’s English Only Law is a bad
idea because the social costs far outweigh the tax savings.” Here you have your main claim, or your thesis, hooked to your main reason with “because.” You can also give your reason first and your thesis second and hook them together with “therefore.” “The social costs far outweigh the tax savings, therefore, the English Only Law is a bad idea.” What you have created here is an enthymeme. This is an intimidating word, but for our purposes it simply means a reasoned thesis. And, as noted above, an enthymeme takes two basic forms:

The thesis because reason
or
Reason therefore thesis

What an enthymeme does for you as a writer is provide a starting point for your essay that also provides structure. The way an enthymeme provides structure is that each enthymeme implies certain responsibilities for the writer. Back to our example. “Utah’s English Only Law is a bad idea because the social costs far outweigh the tax savings.” The main claim is that the law is a bad idea and the main reason is that the social costs outweigh the tax savings, but there is a lot missing here that the essay needs to fill in. For example, what exactly is the English Only Law? What tax savings will it provide? What will the social costs of such a law be? Why do these costs outweigh the tax savings? Is there a good alternative to English Only?

Once you have identified your thesis and hooked it to your main reason, the responsibilities of the rest of your essay seem to evolve naturally. The enthymeme is a starting place that can point the way. If you look at the above example, you can see that an essay must answer, at a minimum, the questions that we have listed. As you begin to write, other questions and reasons will probably arise and you will need to decide if they need to be included in your essay.
A good enthymeme also provides a clue to the form your essay should take. In high school many of you were probably taught to write five paragraph essays. This form is taught because as a writer you know exactly where to begin and where to stop. The problem with the five paragraph essay, however, is that most topics don't fit such a strict form. What the enthymeme does is provide you with a place to start that implies the responsibilities of your essay; the form of your essay will grow out of those responsibilities. The number of paragraphs, where your reasons go, the length of your essay will all depend on the responsibilities implied by your enthymeme.

In theory this all sounds easy, but in practice all writing is difficult. What you need to do as a student is try it out, struggle with it, experiment. As you do this, you will develop the skills this class is attempting to teach and ultimately become a better writer and thinker.

Answer questions