

Thesis and Outlining

The first step in creating an outline or a premise statement is to write a *thesis* or *premise statement*. This is simply putting your book idea in a nutshell. This process goes all the way back to the ancient Latin writers. They had a three-part formula for creating a thesis: *an sit, quid sit* and *quale sit*. For those who don't speak Latin (including myself), the translation is: *whether it is, what it is* and *what kind it is*. (This applies to both nonfiction and fiction.)

1. **Whether It Is.** Does “it” (your idea) exist? How do we know it does? How can we identify it? In other words, a good way start boiling down your idea is to seemingly shoot yourself in the foot — question whether it's true at all! (Do you remember how I introduced this class?) Then decide that if it is true, there has to be reasons why. The *an sit* step has the potential to bring the element of *controversy* into your thesis — and in this case, that's a good thing.
2. **What It Is.** How is it defined? How is it different? How is it the same? By defining what your topic is, you get at the *essence* of the thing. Be clear and concrete; this is no place to get metaphoric! Avoid using a form of the same term to define a term (“a poet writes poetry”). And avoid using a negative statement in defining (“a poet is not a prose writer”).
3. **What Kind It Is.** What categories does it fit in? What are its qualities? This is the step at which you *should* use the negative, and you *should* use metaphors and similes.

This exercise may make you wonder if you really know *anything* about the topic/theme of your book. Don't let that discourage you; let it drive you to further brainstorming and researching.

The Synopsis/Tagline Challenge

Next, I want to challenge you to write a *synopsis* — a description of your book in 20 words or less. Tough? You bet! But give it a try, focusing on an elevator pitch you can tweet. One way to get yourself started is to take key words from your thesis and string them together.

If you manage to get the description down to 20 words, maybe you can even create a *tagline* — a phrase (not usually a complete sentence) in 10 words or less that does not describe as much as it highlights the book's benefits or unique appeal (think Coca-Cola, “the pause that refreshes”).

Different Books, Different Structures

No book outline is entirely unique — and you wouldn't want it to be. The chapters and sections should follow a familiar, logical progression, or the reader is apt to get lost and stop reading. This logical progression will vary, however, according to the type of book:

- **Biography:** chronological and/or topical
- **Devotional:** daily/weekly sections with repeated format (e.g., Scripture-commentary-prayer)
- **Christian Living:** definition, distinctions, application, conclusion
- **How-to:** identification, materials needed, step-by-step instructions, evaluation/recap
- **Exposé:** revelation, specifying errors, show results of errors, present alternative