

AP Literature/Composition:  
Thesis, Claims, Assertions, Evidence and Analysis

1. **Thesis** - The thesis is a one-sentence statement that answers a prompt or paper exigence (a situation calling for action or attention). The thesis must clearly and concisely answer the prompt with one robust sentence.

Prompt – What universe is created by James Thurber in the short story “The Secret Life of Walter Mitty”?

Exigence – Write an essay about the universe created by James Thurber in the short story “The Secret Life of Walter Mitty.”

Awful – Thurber is very good at creating a universe.

Poor – Thurber creates an interesting universe in the story.

Below Average – Thurber creates a universe based on a lot of things about Mitty’s life.

Average – Thurber creates a universe about escape.

Good – Thurber creates a universe in which escape is seen as relevant to humans.

Excellent – Thurber creates a universe in “The Secret Life of Walter Mitty” in which escape is paramount to the psychological well-being of individuals.

Superior – “The Secret Life of Walter Mitty” by James Thurber views psychological escape through fantasy as a salient element of personal balance and order.

The thesis is your answer to a prompt; it is the statement that you want the reader to accept after reading your paper. You simply want the reader to accept your observation as viable or possible within the realm of a myriad of possibilities.

The rest of the paper is the substantiation of the thesis. That is, the paper must be cohesive and consistent in its attempt to prove that Thurber views “psychological escape through fantasy as a salient element of personal balance and order.” **ALL IDEAS IN THE PAPER MUST BE RELATED TO THIS THESIS.**

2. **Claims** - Claims are statements that support the considerations in the thesis. Claims are also statements that are in need of proof, that is, the reader cannot accept them at face value; the writer must show that the facts of the story prove what the claim states. Generally, a thesis is supported by two or more claims.

Thesis - “The Secret Life of Walter Mitty” by James Thurber views psychological escape through fantasy as a salient element of personal balance and order.

Claim #1 – Thurber believes humans use escape to achieve a sense of personal dignity.

Claim #2 – Thurber observes that often humans use fantasy to escape the pedantic nature of everyday life.

Notice how the two claims relate to the concepts of “escape” and “fantasy” embedded in the thesis. Here is an example of two bad claims.

Example: Claim #1 – Mitty is married.

Claim #2 – Mitty is the focus character.

Although both the claims are true, they are not related to the thesis. Look at a simple example.

Thesis: I want you to buy a safe car.

Acceptable claim: Buy a car with air bags.

Unacceptable claim: Buy a car with leather seats.

The bad claims about Mitty are as ridiculous as trying to buy a safe car and using leather seats as a safety device.

Also notice that the claims directly address the thesis by using the phrases “Thurber believes . . .” and “Thurber observes . . .”. The prompt calls for “an essay about the universe created by James Thurber”. By using Thurber as the subjects of the sentences in the claims, you have consistently respected the point of view of the prompt. If you had written as a claim “Humans use escape to achieve a sense of personal dignity”, while your idea not false, the point of view of the idea is not on Thurber but on the polemic (philosophical opinion) notion that “humans escape”. The claim is not longer consistent to the prompt even though it seems to be.

You may use two or more claims, but usually no more than four.

Claims become the focus of paragraphs in your paper. That is, proof of the claims make up your confirmation of the truth of the thesis.

3. **Assertions** – assertions are statements that explain the claim, add detail to the claim and/or transition from the claim to the evidence.

Example: Thesis - “The Secret Life of Walter Mitty” by James Thurber views psychological escape through fantasy as a salient element of personal balance and order.

Claim #1 – Humans use escape to achieve a sense of personal dignity.

Assertions:

- a. Mitty’s wife continually criticizes Walter’s behavior.
- b. Mitty escapes the bantering of his wife to achieve a sense of dignity.
- c. When she banters Mitty, he escapes into a fantasy.
- d. The fantasies cast Mitty in the role of dignified hero – the opposite role his wife carves for him.

These assertions come from the story. They may not be presented in this exact fashion when you write your paper, but they are the explanation and substantiation of the claim.

Lets put this claim and assertions in a paragraph.

Humans use escape to achieve a sense of personal dignity. Mitty escapes the bantering of his wife to achieve a sense of dignity. During the course of a shopping trip, Mitty's wife continually criticized Walter's behavior. The constant denigration humbles Mitty. When the condemnations escalate, Mitty escapes into a variety of fantasies. In his own mind, during the fantasies, Mitty casts himself as a hero in action adventure stories or romances.

First of all, this is a weak paragraph. It lacks rigor, that is, detail. It is nothing more than a list of assertions without a key element: proof.

4. **Proof** - Proof consists of the ideas you use to prove the considerations in the claims and assertions. Proof is made up of two ideas: evidence and analysis. Proof is the meat of the paper. Generally each claim needs A PREPONDERANCE OF EVIDENCE AND ANALYSIS THAT: A. SUBSTANTIATES THE CLAIM AND ASSERTIONS AND B. ANALYZES THE EVIDENCE IN TERMS OF THE THESIS.

a. **Evidence** - evidence is quotations or documented incidences of behavior from the literature that substantiates your claim and/or assertions. Where claims and assertions are *invented*, that is they are YOUR mental conclusions or ideas given what you read about the moment, evidence is *found*, that is YOU FIND evidence in the literature: Lets add evidence to the paragraph we just wrote. Note how the evidence uses source documentation. Added material is in bold.

Thurber believes humans use escape to achieve a sense of personal dignity. Mitty escapes the bantering of his wife and society to achieve a sense of dignity. During the course of a shopping trip, Mitty's wife continually criticizes Walter's behavior. **At the beginning of the story, Mitty's wife denigrates his driving. She yells, "Not so fast! You're driving too fast! [ . . . ] What are you driving so fast for?" (Thurber). During the course of the story she criticizes his driving, his nerves, his memory, and his clothes. The constant denigration humbles Mitty. At one point he thinks about how everyone is "so damn cocky" (Thurber) when he makes mistakes; in fact Mitty states that "he hated these weekly trips to town – he was always getting something wrong" (Thurber). When the condemnations of his wife and others escalate, Mitty escapes into a variety of fantasies.** In his own mind, during the fantasies, Mitty casts himself as a hero in action adventure stories or romances. **For example, while he is driving the streets waiting for his wife, he fantasizes that he is "Dr. Mitty" who wrote a book on "streptothricosis" (Thurber) and enacts delicate surgeries. At another juncture he becomes dangerous defendant in a murder case.**

OK. There's a lot of evidence from the story that substantiates the assertions, but the quotations are not integrated into the ideas of the paragraph. They are simply glued into

the paragraph. Nothing exists to finish the paragraph off – to tie up the kernel of the claim that “bantering” causes the “escape” to achieve “dignity”. Also, to tie the claim, assertions and evidence to the central thesis that is concerned with “psychological escape through fantasy as a salient element of personal balance and order”. These ideas must be accounted for – that is the writer must look **BACKWARDS** and respect that previous ideas must be used again. So we need to add analysis.

b. **Analysis** – analysis is the commentary one uses to interpret the evidence in terms of the claim and the thesis. It is the “spin” a writer puts on the evidence. Analysis leads the reader’s thinking on how the writer wants the reader to think about the evidence. It also links the claim, assertions, and evidence to the thesis FOR the reader. So, lets add it. Additions are in bold.

Humans use escape to achieve a sense of personal dignity. Mitty escapes the bantering of his wife and society to achieve a sense of dignity. **Mitty believes his life is unbalanced and disordered because others make him feel low and worthless.** During the course of a shopping trip, Mitty’s wife continually criticizes Walter’s behavior. At the beginning of the story, Mitty’s wife denigrates his driving. She yells, “Not so fast! You’re driving too fast! [ . . . ] What are you driving so fast for?” (Thurber). During he course of the story she criticizes his driving, his nerves, his memory, and his clothes. The constant denigration humbles Mitty. **He is in psychological turmoil, turmoil he turns on himself, indeed, his image of himself is at stake.** At one point he thinks about how everyone is “so damn cocky” (Thurber) when he makes mistakes; in fact Mitty states that “he hated these weekly trips to town – he was always getting something wrong” (Thurber). **Mitty apparently judges himself harshly – he is disorder in a world he deems as ordered.** When the condemnations of his wife and others escalate, Mitty escapes into a variety of fantasies. In his own mind, during the fantasies, Mitty casts himself as a hero in action adventure stories or romances. For example, while he is driving the streets waiting for his wife, he fantasizes that he is “Dr. Mitty” who wrote a book on “streptothricosis” (Thurber) and enacts delicate surgeries. At another juncture he becomes dangerous defendant in a murder case. **The fantasies offer Mitty a sense of worth and dignity in, what he considers, a cruel and unyielding universe. In his mind, Mitty is in control; a significant person of merit. These fantasies save his self image, for at the end of the story, despite the setbacks in his real life, he is “[u]ndefeated, inscrutable to the last”.**

The above analysis never takes its eye off the original thesis. While the first paragraph that was written is not terrible, it lacks the cohesive notion of the thesis; thus, it lacks detailed rigor and robust ideas. Notice that the language of the thesis and the claim are included in the analysis. This linking of ideas creates cohesiveness, control, and solidifies your persuasion.