**What is a Thesis and How do you Write one?**

First you have to differentiate between a topic, theme, and thesis:

**Topic**  
Definition: A subject treated or presented by a literary work. A work can have more than one topic; some will be more dominant than others.   
Example: Emotion  
  
**Theme**  
Definition: A central or dominating idea in a literary work. A work can have more than one theme. Although in an informal discussion of a work we may use interchangeably "topic" and "theme," in actuality the theme is the statement the author makes about the topic. For example, what is Homer saying about emotion? A theme is expressed in a complete sentence.   
Example: (One theme found in the *Odyssey* is that) An excess of emotion prevents thought and action.   
  
**Thesis**  
Definition: The (your) central idea of a piece of writing, in this case a work of literary interpretation or analysis. The thesis should make its point by relating some aspect (symbolism, setting, etc.) of the work to its theme or to the meaning of the whole.   
Example:   
(aspect of the work) As an increasing number of Odysseus’ companions die, Homer’s *Odyssey* shows that (theme) excessive emotion prevents thought and action, as fixation on death ironically only leads to more death.

**How to generate a thesis statement:**

*Brainstorm the topic*.  
After reading, think back on which passage/lines stand out to you. What topic does it revolve around?

Let’s pretend you liked lines 56-66 of Book XII:

“for that time I will no longer tell you in detail which way

of the two your course must lie, but you yourself must consider

this in your own mind. I will tell you the two ways of it.

on one side there are overhanging rocks, and against them

crashes the heavy swell of dark-eyed Amphitrite.

The blessed gods call these rocks the Rovers. By this way

not even any flying thing, not even the tremulous

doves, which carry ambrosia to Zeus the father, can pass through,

but every time the sheer rock catches away one even

of these; but the Father then adds another to keep the number

right. No ship of men that came here ever has fled through,

You start out with a thesis statement like this (assuming you focused on lines 56-66 on Book XII):

**Choice.**

This fragment isn't a thesis statement. Instead, it simply indicates a general subject. Furthermore, your reader doesn't know what you/Homer have to say about choice.

*Narrow the topic*  
Your annotations, however, have led you to the conclusion that are often involved in whether or not men have (or appear to have) choice/free will.

You change your thesis to look like this:

**Gods and choice.**

This fragment not only announces your subject, but it focuses on one main idea: the gods’ involvement in choice. Furthermore, it raises a subject upon which reasonable people could disagree, because while most people might agree that the gods are involved in choice, not everyone would agree on the level and nature of their involvement. You should note that this fragment is not a thesis statement because your reader doesn't know your conclusions on the topic.

*Take a position on the topic.*  
After reflecting on the topic a little while longer, you decide that what you really want to say about this topic is that the gods provide knowledge and information to inform decisions, but the actual action is left up to humans. This is where a theme (of sorts) appears in your thesis.

You revise your thesis to look like this:

**Gods inform, but don’t dictate, and therefore eliminate, human choice.**

This statement asserts your position, but the terms more attention and the environment are vague.

*Use specific language*.  
You decide to explain what you mean about "inform," so you write:

**Circe informs Odysseus of his options in facing Skylla and Charybdis, but doesn’t dictate, and therefore eliminate, his ability to choose.**

This statement is specific, but it isn't a thesis. It merely summarizes what happens in the scene that’s related to gods and choice instead of making an assertion.

*Make an assertion based on clearly stated support.*  
You finally revise your thesis statement one more time to look like this:

**In Book XII of Homer’s *Odyssey*, Circe informs Odysseus of his options in facing Skylla and Charybdis, but doesn’t dictate, and therefore eliminate, his ability to choose, showing that the ultimate responsibility for action must lie in body with man, rather than in mind with the gods.**

Notice how the thesis answers the question, "Why should I care about choice?" When you started thinking about the paper, you may not have had a specific question in mind, but as you became more involved in the topic, your ideas became more specific. Your thesis changed to reflect your new insights.