Narrowing the Thesis Statement

To make sure your paper has the focus it needs, you have to know how to narrow your thesis. For example, say you’re writing a 3-4 page research paper on Kate Chopin’s “Desiree’s Baby.” You come up with the following thesis: “Desiree’s Baby” depicts a lot of racial tension.

How would you evaluate that thesis? Does it give you a really good idea of what that paper is going to be about? Or do you find yourself wondering what the main point is? If you think that thesis is too broad, we agree! Just saying that a text is “full of racial tension” is more of a general observation rather than a specific claim, so it leaves the paper without much focus.

Here are a few steps that can help narrow that thesis to something more specific:

1) Make it more precise by asking yourself “what kind?” In this case, we would ask ourselves, “What kind of racial tension are we talking about?”
   - “Desiree’s Baby” depicts upper class families’ views on race
     - This thesis is already better than the original, because now we know we’re focusing on upper class families in particular.

2) Now ask yourself if you can add any kind of set parameters, like identifying a specific time period or geographic location that your topic can be contained in:
   - “Desiree’s Baby” depicts upper class families’ views on race in the pre-Civil War South
     - Now, not only are we focused on upper class families but on a specific time and place as well.

3) Then decide what exactly you want to claim about it:
   - “Desiree’s Baby” depicts the complexity of upper class families’ views on race in the pre-Civil War South
     - Just by adding the word “complexity,” we’ve managed to make this thesis more of a specific claim. Before, all we were saying was that the text focuses on a particular kind of racial tension at a particular time. Now, though, we’ve added the claim that those tensions are not just present in the story, they’re complex.

4) Don’t forget to ask yourself “How?” to strengthen your thesis:
   - Kate Chopin’s use of symbolism, imagery, and foreshadowing in “Desiree’s Baby” shows the complexity of upper class families’ views on race in the pre-Civil War South
     - Adding specific literary elements like symbolism, imagery, and foreshadowing tells our readers exactly how we’re going to prove our claim, which gives us even more focus and clarity.

Congratulations! Now your thesis has been narrowed to provide a strong sense of focus in your paper.