

## Thesis Statements

After reading this article, you should be able to understand what a thesis statement is, how a thesis statement works, and how you can craft or refine one.

### Introduction

College writing is typically persuasive. Fortunately, you probably already have some skill at persuasion from your daily life. You may persuade your roommate to clean up, your parents to let you borrow the car, and your friend to vote for your favorite candidate or policy. Similarly, college assignments ask you to convince your reader that you have an interesting, logical point of view on the subject you are studying. This form of persuasion, often called academic argument, follows a predictable pattern in writing (for more help, see our handouts on argument and paragraph development). After a brief introduction of your topic, state your point of view directly; this is a thesis statement, which serves as a summary of the argument you'll make in the rest of your paper. Typically, a thesis is one sentence that's often stated in your introduction paragraph or near the beginning of your paper (for more help on introductions, see our handout).

### What Is a Thesis Statement?

#### A Thesis Statement:

- **Tells the reader how you will interpret the significance of the subject matter.**
- **Is a road map for the paper.** It tells the reader what to expect from the rest of the paper.
- **Directly answers the assignment prompt.** A thesis is an interpretation of a question or subject, not the subject itself. The subject, or topic, of an essay might be World War II or Moby Dick; a thesis offers a way to understand the war or the novel.
- **Makes a claim that others might dispute.**

- **Is usually a single sentence somewhere in your first paragraph that presents your argument to the reader.** The rest of the paper, the body of the essay, gathers and organizes evidence that will persuade the reader of the logic of your interpretation.

An assignment may not explicitly state that you need a thesis statement because your instructor may assume that you will include one. When in doubt, ask your professor. When an assignment asks you to **analyze**, to **interpret**, to **compare and contrast**, to demonstrate **cause and effect**, or to **take a stand on an issue**, it is likely that you are being asked to develop a thesis and to support it persuasively.

### **How Do I Get a Thesis?**

Before you develop an argument on any topic, you have to collect and organize evidence, look for possible relationships between known facts (such as surprising contrasts or similarities), and think about the significance of these relationships. Once you do this, you'll probably have a "working thesis," a basic main idea or argument that you think you can support with evidence.

Writers use all kinds of techniques to stimulate their thinking and to help them clarify relationships or comprehend the significance of a topic to arrive at a thesis statement (For more ideas on how to get started, see our handout on brainstorming).

### **How Do I Know if My Thesis Is Strong?**

If you have time, run it by your instructor or TA to get some feedback. Feel free to make an online or in-person appointment at the Writing Center, too (check out our handout on getting

feedback for more tips). If you don't have time to get advice, you can do some thesis evaluation of your own by asking yourself the following:

- **Do I answer the assignment question?** Re-reading the prompt after constructing a working thesis can help you fix an argument that misses the focus of the question.
- **Have I taken a position that others might challenge/oppose?** If your thesis states facts that no one would, or even could, disagree with, it's possible that you are simply providing a summary, rather than making an argument (see our handout on summary for distinguishing between analysis and summary).
- **Is my thesis statement specific enough?** Thesis statements that are too vague often do not have a strong argument. If your thesis contains words like "good" or "successful," see if you could be more specific: *why* is something "good"; *what specifically* makes something "successful?"
- **Does my thesis pass the "So what?" test?** If a reader's first response is, "So what?" then you need to clarify, forge a relationship, or connect to a larger issue.
- **Does my essay support my thesis without wandering?** If your thesis and the body of your essay do not seem to go together, one of them has to change. It's okay to change your working thesis to reflect things you've figured out in the writing process (for help with revision, check out our handout).
- **Does my thesis pass the "how/why?" test?** If a reader's first response is "how?" or "why?" your thesis may be too open-ended and lack guidance. See what you can add to help your reader understand your position right from the beginning.

### Example #1

Suppose you're taking a course on 19th-century America, and the instructor hands out the following essay assignment: Compare and contrast the reasons why the North and South fought the Civil War. You might type the following:

*The North and South fought the Civil War for many reasons, some of which were the same and some different.*

The thesis above is weak because it restates the question without providing any additional information. It's important to tell the reader where your paper is heading. A reader of this thesis might think, "What reasons? How are they the same? How are they different?" Ask yourself these same questions as you begin to compare Northern and Southern attitudes (perhaps you first think, "The South believed slavery was right, and the North thought slavery was wrong"). That's a great start, so push your comparison toward an interpretation. Why did one side think slavery was right and the other side think it was wrong? If you look again at the evidence, you may decide that you're going to argue that the North believed slavery was immoral while the South believed it upheld the Southern way of life. You write:

*While both sides fought the Civil War over the issue of slavery, the North fought for moral reasons while the South fought to preserve its own institutions.*

Now you have a working thesis! Your thesis describes a reason for the war and some idea of how the two sides disagreed over it. As you write the essay, you will probably characterize these differences more precisely, so your working thesis may start to seem too vague. Maybe you decide that both sides fought for moral reasons, but they focused on different moral issues. You end up revising and creating a final thesis that really captures the argument in your paper:

*While both Northerners and Southerners believed they fought against tyranny and oppression, Northerners focused on the oppression of slaves while Southerners defended their own right to self-government.*

Compare the thesis above to the original weak thesis. This final thesis presents a way of **interpreting** evidence that illuminates the significance of the question. Keep in mind that this is one of many possible interpretations of the Civil War—it’s not the one and only right answer to the question. **There isn’t one right answer; there are only strong and weak thesis statements and strong and weak uses of evidence.**

### **Example #2**

Suppose your literature professor hands out the following assignment: Write an analysis of some aspect of Mark Twain’s novel *Huckleberry Finn*. “This will be easy,” you think. “I loved *Huckleberry Finn*!” You grab a pad of paper and write:

*Mark Twain’s Huckleberry Finn is a great American novel.*

Why is this thesis weak? The question asked you to **analyze**, not **summarize**. Your professor probably wants you to think about *why* it’s such a great novel (What do Huck’s adventures tell us about life, America, coming of age, and race relations, etc.?). To do this, pick an aspect of the novel that you think is important to its structure or meaning (for example, the role of storytelling, the contrasting scenes between the shore and the river, or the relationships between adults and children). Now you write:

*In Huckleberry Finn, Mark Twain develops a contrast between life on the river and life on the shore.*

Now your working thesis has potential: it highlights an important aspect of the novel for investigation. It's still not clear about what your analysis will reveal. Your reader is intrigued, but may be thinking, "So what? What's the point of this contrast? What does it signify?" Perhaps you're not sure yet, either. That's fine — begin writing and see what you discover. It may be helpful to free write, make lists, or jot down Huck's actions and reactions. Eventually you will be able to clarify for yourself, and then for the reader, why this contrast matters. After considering the evidence and your own insights, you write:

*Through its contrasting river and shore scenes, Twain's Huckleberry Finn suggests that to find the true expression of American democratic ideals, one must leave "civilized" society and go back to nature.*

This final thesis statement presents an interpretation of a literary work based on an analysis of its content. Now you must present evidence from the novel that will convince the reader of your interpretation.

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