

Understanding Thesis Statements

A thesis statement in an essay is a sentence that explicitly identifies the purpose of the paper or previews its main ideas.

A thesis statement is an assertion, not a statement of fact or an observation.

Fact or observation: People use many lawn chemicals.

Thesis: People are poisoning the environment with chemicals merely to keep their lawns clean.

A thesis takes a stand rather than announcing a subject.

Announcement: The thesis of this paper is the difficulty of solving our environmental problems.

Thesis: Solving our environmental problems is more difficult than many environmentalists believe.

A thesis is the main idea, not the title. It must be a complete sentence that explains in some detail what you expect to write about.

Title: Social Security and Old Age.

Thesis: Continuing changes in the Social Security System makes it almost impossible to plan intelligently for one's retirement.

A thesis statement is narrow, rather than broad. If the thesis statement is sufficiently narrow, it can be fully supported.

Broad: The American steel industry has many problems.

Narrow: The primary problem of the American steel industry is the lack of funds to renovate outdated plants and equipment.

A thesis statement is specific rather than vague or general.

Vague: Hemingway's war stories are very good.

Specific: Hemingway's stories helped create a new prose style by employing extensive dialogue, shorter sentences, and strong Anglo-Saxon words.

A thesis statement has one main point rather than several main points. More than one point may be too difficult for the reader to understand and the writer to support.

More than one main point: Stephen Hawking's physical disability has not prevented him from becoming a world-renowned physicist, and his book is the subject of a movie.

One Main point: Stephen Hawking's physical disability has not prevented him from becoming a world renowned physicist.

You can revise your thesis statement whenever you want to while you are writing your essay. Writers often discover what their real purpose and point is in the process of putting their thoughts into words and then reading what they've written.

How to Tell a Strong Thesis Sentence from a Weak One.

1. A strong thesis takes some sort of stand.

Remember that your thesis needs to show your conclusions about a subject. For example, if you are writing a paper for a class on fitness, you might be asked to choose a popular weight-loss product to evaluate. Here are two thesis statements:

There are some negative and positive aspects to the Banana Herb Tea Supplement.

This is a weak thesis. First, it fails to take a stand. Second, the phrase "negative and positive" aspects" are vague.

Because Banana Herb Tea Supplement promotes rapid weight loss that results in the loss of muscle and lean body mass, it poses a potential danger to customers.

This is a strong thesis because it takes a stand.

2. A strong thesis justifies discussion.

Your thesis should indicate the point of the discussion. If your assignment is to write a paper on kinship systems, using your own family as an example, you might come up with either of these two thesis statements:

My family is an extended family.

This is a weak thesis because it states an observation. Your reader won't be able to tell the point of the statement, and will probably stop reading.

While most American families would view consanguineal marriage as a threat to the nuclear family structure, many Iranian families, like my own, believe that these marriages help reinforce kinship ties in an extended family.

This is a strong thesis because it shows how your experience contradicts a widely-accepted view. A good strategy for creating a strong thesis is to show that the topic is controversial. Readers will be interested in reading the rest of the essay to see how you support your point.

3. A strong thesis expresses one main idea.

Readers need to be able to see that your paper has one main point. If your thesis expresses more than one idea, then you might confuse your readers about the subject of your paper. For example:

Companies need to exploit the marketing potential of the Internet, and web pages can provide both advertising and customer support.

This is a weak thesis statement because the reader can't decide whether the paper is about marketing on the Internet or web pages. To revise the thesis, the relationship between the two ideas needs to become more clear. One way to revise the thesis would be to write:

Because the Internet is filled with tremendous marketing potential, companies should exploit this potential by using web pages that offer both advertising and customer support.

This is a strong thesis because it shows that the two ideas are related. Hint: a great many clear and engaging thesis statements contain words like "because," "since," "so," "although," "unless," and "however."

4. A strong thesis statement is specific.

A thesis statement should show exactly what your paper will be about, and will help you keep your paper to a manageable topic. For example, if you write a paper on hunger, you might say:

World hunger has many causes and effects.

This is a weak thesis statement for two major reasons. First, "world hunger" can't be discussed thoroughly in five or ten pages. Second, "many causes and effects" is vague. You should be able to identify specific causes and effects. A revised thesis might look like this:

Hunger persists in Appalachia because jobs are scarce and farming in the infertile soil is rarely profitable.

This is a strong thesis because it narrows the subject to a more specific and manageable topic and it also identifies the specific causes for the existence of hunger.

More Detail & Examples

The Thesis Statement

The thesis statement is that sentence or two in your text that contains the focus of your essay and tells your reader what the essay is going to be about. Although it is certainly possible to write a good essay without a thesis statement (many narrative essays, for example, contain only an implied thesis statement), the lack of a thesis statement may well be a symptom of an essay beset by a lack of focus. Many writers think of a thesis statement as an umbrella: everything that you carry along in your essay has to fit under this umbrella, and if you try to take on packages that don't fit, you will either have to get a bigger umbrella or something's going to get wet.

The thesis statement is also a good test for the scope of your intent. The principle to remember is that when you try to do too much, you end up doing less or nothing at all. Can we write a good paper about problems in higher education in the United States? At best, such a paper would be vague and scattered in its approach. Can we write a good paper about problems in higher education in Connecticut? Well, we're getting there, but that's still an awfully big topic, something we might be able to handle in a book or a Ph.D. dissertation, but certainly not in a paper meant for a Composition course.

Can we write a paper about problems within the community college system in Connecticut. Now we're narrowing down to something useful, but once we start writing such a paper, we would find that we're leaving out so much information, so many ideas that even most casual brainstorming would produce, that we're not accomplishing much. What if we wrote about the problem of community colleges in Connecticut being so close together geographically that they tend to duplicate programs unnecessarily and impinge on each other's turf? Now we have a focus that we can probably write about in a few

pages (although more, certainly, could be said) and it would have a good argumentative edge to it.

To back up such a thesis statement would require a good deal of work, however, and we might be better off if we limited the discussion to an example of how two particular community colleges tend to work in conflict with each other. It's not a matter of being lazy; it's a matter of limiting our discussion to the work that can be accomplished within a certain number of pages.

The thesis statement should remain flexible until the paper is actually finished. It ought to be one of the last things that we fuss with in the rewriting process. If we discover new information in the process of writing our paper that ought to be included in the thesis statement, then we'll have to rewrite our thesis statement. On the other hand, if we discover that our paper has done adequate work but the thesis statement appears to include things that we haven't actually addressed, then we need to limit that thesis statement. If the thesis statement is something that we needed prior approval for, changing it might require the permission of the instructor or thesis committee, but it is better to seek such permission than to write a paper that tries to do too much or that claims to do less than it actually accomplishes.

The thesis statement usually appears near the beginning of a paper. It can be the first sentence of an essay, but that often feels like a simplistic, unexciting beginning. It more frequently appears at or near the end of the first paragraph or two. Here is the first paragraph of Arthur Schlesinger, Jr.'s essay *The Crisis of American Masculinity*. Notice how everything drives the reader toward the last sentence and how that last sentence clearly signals what the rest of this essay is going to do.

What has happened to the American male? For a long time, he seemed utterly confident in his manhood, sure of his masculine role in society, easy and definite in his sense of sexual identity. The frontiersmen of James Fenimore Cooper, for example, never had any concern about masculinity; they were men, and it did not occur to them to think twice about it. Even well into the twentieth century, the heroes of Dreiser, of Fitzgerald, of Hemingway remain men. But one begins to detect a new theme emerging in some of these authors, especially in Hemingway: the theme of the male hero increasingly preoccupied with proving his virility to himself. And by mid-century, the male role had plainly lost its rugged clarity of outline. Today men are more and more conscious of maleness not as a fact but as a problem. The ways by which American men affirm their masculinity are uncertain and obscure. There are multiplying signs, indeed, that something has gone badly wrong with the American male's conception of himself.

The first paragraph serves as kind of a funnel opening to the essay which draws and invites readers into the discussion, which is then focused by the thesis statement before the work of the essay actually begins. You will discover that some writers will delay the articulation of the paper's focus, its thesis, until the very end of the paper. That is possible if it is clear to thoughtful readers throughout the paper what the business of the essay truly is; frankly, it's probably not a good idea for beginning writers.

Avoid announcing the thesis statement as if it were a thesis statement. In other words, avoid using phrases such as "The purpose of this paper is" or "In this paper, I will attempt to" Such phrases betray this paper to be the work of an amateur. If necessary, write the thesis statement that way the first time; it might help you determine, in fact, that this is your thesis statement. But when you rewrite your paper, eliminate the bald assertion that this is your thesis statement and write the statement itself without that annoying, unnecessary preface.

Here are the first two paragraphs of George Orwell's classic essay, "Politics and the English Language" (1946). Which of these sentences would you say is or are the thesis statement of the essay which is to follow? Everything that follows in this essay, then, would have to be something that fits under the "umbrella" of that thesis statement.

Most people who bother with the matter at all would admit that the English language is in a bad way, but it is generally assumed that we cannot by conscious action do anything about it. Our civilization is decadent, and our language—so the argument runs—must inevitably share in the general collapse. It follows that any struggle against the abuse of language is a sentimental archaism, like preferring candles to electric light or hansom cabs to aeroplanes. Underneath this lies the half-conscious belief that language is a natural growth and not an instrument which we shape for our own purposes.

Now, it is clear that the decline of a language must ultimately have political and economic causes: it is not due simply to the bad influence of this or that individual writer. But an effect can become a cause, reinforcing the original cause and producing the same effect in an intensified form, and so on indefinitely. A man may take to drink because he feels himself to be a failure, and then fail all the more completely because he drinks. It is rather the same thing that is happening to the English language. It becomes ugly and inaccurate because our thoughts are foolish, but the slovenliness of our language makes it easier for us to have foolish thoughts. The point is that the process is reversible. Modern English, especially written English, is full of bad habits which spread by imitation and which can be avoided if one is willing to take the necessary trouble. If one gets rid of these habits one can think more clearly, and to think clearly is a necessary first step towards political regeneration: so that the fight against bad English is not frivolous and is not the exclusive concern of professional writers. I will come back to this presently, and I hope that by that time the meaning of what I have said here will have become clearer. Meanwhile, here are five specimens of the English language as it is now habitually written.