

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.