

THESIS STATEMENTS

A thesis statement clarifies an essay's argument and direction in order to create a unified essay. Typically, the thesis statement is positioned at the introductory paragraph's end so that it will provide a forecast for the paper. Unfortunately, coming up with a good thesis statement isn't always easy. For this reason, look at some characteristics of successful thesis statements and explore ways to invent them.

A. Thesis statements contain a point or assertion.

A thesis statement needs to contain the core of your argument and make an assertion that your essay supports. Even if you are writing an analytical or descriptive essay, your intent is to convince the reader of a point: your specific position on a topic. For example, you might write a literary analysis using the following thesis, one that still argues a point:

James Joyce's "Araby" is like a work of visual art in that, in order to grasp its full impact and meaning, a reader must take time, both in reflection and through repeated encounters with it, to absorb the sensual imagery that forms both the backdrop for the protagonist's actions and creates the movement of the plot in and of itself.

B. Thesis statements need to provide a unified argument.

If you notice that your thesis can be divided into two topics connected loosely by a coordinating conjunction (*for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so*), try to connect the two statements with a subordinating conjunction (*through, although, because, since, etc.*) to show the relationship between the two statements. You could take the thesis statement,

*Martin Luther King Jr.'s "Letter from Birmingham Jail" uses emotional appeal very effectively to make his readers feel the plight of African American people **and** it uses lots of moving examples of the problems African American people dealt with.*

and change it to:

*Martin Luther King Jr.'s "Letter from Birmingham Jail" uses emotional appeal very effectively to make his readers feel the plight of African American people **because** it uses moving examples of the problems African American people dealt with.*

If you cannot link the two portions of your thesis with a subordinating conjunction, or if doing so creates only a sentence of unclearly related parts, you should consider choosing and developing a single focus.

C. Thesis statements need to be adequately limited in scope, but not so limited they give you nothing to explore.

One way to determine whether a thesis needs narrowing is to ask if it seems indisputable or obvious. For example, *There are many different types of music in contemporary society* is both obvious and indisputable, a sure sign that it is too broad. Narrow broad statements by making certain you have adequate information to support them. You can also narrow a broad thesis by making it more analytic and argumentative. It's vital to make an arguable assertion and not just an observation.

D. Thesis statements need to be analytic: to contain a “how” or “why” element that offers reasons for their assertions.

In looking at an assertion, see if it is accompanied by an answer about *why* or in *what ways* or *how* this assertion is worthy of consideration. This thesis is simply an assertion:

Karen Horney's belief that men envy women's ability to have children is preposterous.

Such a simple, assertive thesis could be strengthened by an explanation of *why* Horney's idea is "preposterous":

Karen Horney's belief that men envy women's ability to have children is preposterous because, while the ability to nurture unborn life is important, the mechanics of doing so—the nine months of hormonal and bodily change—and the psychological stress pregnancy creates are incredible burdens few people, regardless of their gender, would look forward to.

At the same time, make sure that you have not made a universal, pro/con statement that has oversimplified an issue, and that you can both specify and justify your reasoning.

E. Thesis statements should be clear.

Vague language like "interesting" or "difficult" needs to be supported by your thesis. Also, abstract, catch-all words like "society" usually need limiting. Which society will you be dealing with: the one experienced by a Malaysian businesswoman, a Norwegian clerk, or a middle class occupant of New Delhi? Don't assume everyone knows the society you're writing about. Also, almost all abstract language can be strengthened by definition. Make sure your thesis doesn't contain terminology (like *society*, *conventional*, *traditional*) that needs clarification. Finally, make your thesis logical and that any cause and effect relationships are clear.

F. Thesis statements need to be creative and energetic.

The easiest way to arrive at an imaginative, vigorous thesis is to write about something that interests you, something about which you have some feelings. Brainstorm and freewrite to help determine what you care about in the topics you're given, or what you care *most* about.

Now, how to come up with a thesis:

1. Consider and choose your purpose for writing the essay. Here are some examples of purposes for writing to get you started:

- Describing a process in order to convince
- Analyzing to convince
- Comparing and/or contrasting to convince
- Defining in order to convince
- Describing/analyzing the causes or consequences of your subject to convince
- Describing types (using classification) in order to convince
- Describing or defining the significance of your subject (Interpretation/Exposition)
- Describing how something happened or came to be (Process/Narration)
- Describing/analyzing a person in order to convince (Characterization)
- Using personal response or reminiscence to convince the reader (Reflection and sometimes Narration)

(Adapted from Jacqueline Berke's *Twenty Questions for the Writer*)

2. Consider who constitutes your audience.

In college, most essays should be addressed to a formal, academic audience. As a result, you should usually write in either the third person (he, she, it, they) or first person (I, we) point of view (check with your professor before using the first person, as some professors do not allow students to use it)—and stick to the point of view you choose. It is never admissible to write in the second person (you) in a formal essay.

You can also use the questions below to help understand your audience for an essay by answering the questions with specific, full sentences.

- *Who are the readers for your essay?*
- *Why have your readers requested this writing? How will they use it?*
- *What do your readers already know about your topic?*
- *What do your readers already know about what you are going to say?*
- *What is it that only you can tell your readers?*

(Adapted from Lee Runciman's *The St. Martin's Workbook*)

3. Consider what a thesis *isn't*. A thesis isn't a topic or a problem.

A *topic* is simply an issue, a subject, a field, a body of knowledge, or a situation—such as *textbooks and the differences among them*. If you write about a topic without forming a thesis, you'll end up with a description. A *problem* is located within a topic when you identify an issue or conflict of concern to you and your reader, a difficulty you and your reader might have with the topic, or a question you'd like answered. A problem is, in essence, a specific position on a topic. A problem within the topic above might be, *Textbooks often don't meet students' needs*.

Analyzing the problem within the topic takes the problem further into a true thesis, an assertion about a topic that you intend to support and explain with your essay. The problem reflected in the sentence above could be stated: *The textbook in our course is causing real difficulty for many students*. From this point, however, the thesis could either be accepted as it is or pushed into a hypothesis involving the problem: *Students are failing to grasp the basic principles in our course **because** the textbook builds on knowledge most students don't have*.

After this, you could take the issue even further by offering a *solution* to the problem: *Instructors of large, required courses should consider pretesting their texts with a representative group of students*.

(Adapted from Linda Flower's *Problem-Solving Strategies for Writing*)

4. Ask yourself questions about a topic.

Philosopher Stephen Toulmin designed a series of questions to help writers analyze their thinking. What follows is a version of these questions:

- *What is the claim I am making?*
- *What are the grounds or good reasons that I use to support my claim?*
- *What underlying assumptions support the grounds of my claim?*
- *What backup evidence do I have or can I find to add more support?*
- *What refutations or objections can be made against my claim and how could I answer them?*
- *In what ways is or should my claim be qualified?*

5. Write to find out what you think.

Experienced writers often start with a working thesis and only come to their finished, refined thesis after writing a first draft of their essay. What this then means is that they go back and revise their thesis based on what they discovered while they wrote and on the conclusion they arrived at in their final paragraph. Their working thesis is often something as blunt and unrefined as *In this paper, I am going to argue that . . .*

6. Along these lines, you can use a formulaic template to get started.

Though you'll want to go back later and change the language so that it isn't formulaic, when you're stuck, sometimes using a fill-in-the-blank template can help. Try filling in the following:

In this essay, I plan to argue for an audience of _____ that _____
because/if/how _____, _____, _____.

Thesis Writing Exercises

Take the following theses, which are lacking either because they are not assertive, they aren't unified, their scope is too broad, they include no element of explanation (the analytic "why" or "because" element), they are unclear—or because they contain a combination of flaws—and improve them.

1. Raising children is a journey of discovery.
2. There are many different kinds of students on a college campus.
3. All English professors are crazy.
4. The American Indian is closer to nature than the Europeans who settled the North American continent.
5. In Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, guilt is important.
6. By saying that people are old, society has created many pictures.
7. Machiavelli's primary concerns for a leader are mean and selfish, and Lao-Tzu's beliefs about leadership are good.