

Writing a Thesis Statement

When you are ready to begin writing an essay, you are ready to think about the thesis and organization. At heart, a thesis is very simple: it is the main idea of your paper, and it answers the question or questions posed by your essay. A thesis statement, usually placed at the end of your introductory paragraph, states the main idea of your essay, often states or implies your attitude or opinion about the subject, and gives your essay **direction**. It is the controlling force behind every word and every sentence. It is a commitment to your reader that you will discuss the idea presented in your thesis and *no other*.

Note: Sometimes it also presents the points that will be covered in the essay. Careful, organized writers can usually work with either type. Writers who tend to skip steps find that listing points helps them to be more thorough. (**As you advance in your level of writing, instructors may request that you omit listing points of development.**) Without the road map that listing your points provides, topic sentences become even more important. You may want to plan each topic sentence to ensure that it is clearly connected to the thesis. Remember, if the points are not listed in the thesis, it does not mean that you haven't planned them; you simply have not listed them.

After you construct your thesis, carefully evaluate the points you plan to make. Watch to make sure they do not overlap, are not too broad, and are not too narrow:

- ✓ Make sure your points are distinct and separate. Otherwise you risk covering the same material more than once.

Example: Thesis with overlap

Although I enjoy my job, I sometimes tire of the long hours, the stress and the pressure.

Example: Overlap eliminated

Although I enjoy my job, I sometimes tire of the long hours, the stress and the low pay.

- ✓ Avoid ideas that are too broad. If you are aware that many books have been written on that point, for example, it is probably too much to cover in a student paragraph or essay

Example: Thesis too broad

Losing weight, controlling my temper, and improving myself are some New Year's resolutions I am trying to keep this year.

Example: Broadness eliminated

Losing weight, controlling my temper, and learning to cook are some New Year's resolutions I am trying to keep this year.

- ✓ Avoid points that are so limited that you will have difficulty expanding them into paragraphs.

Example: Thesis too narrow

Growing up with three sisters has taught me to stand up for myself, to share my hairdryer, and to cherish my family ties.

Example: Eliminating point that was too narrow

Growing up with three sisters has taught me to stand up for myself, to share, and to cherish my family ties.

The kind of thesis that your paper will have depends on the purpose of your writing. A thesis statement usually consists of **two** parts: your topic and then the analysis, explanations, or assertions that you are making about the topic

Note: In some types of writing (narratives or descriptions, for example) a thesis statement is less important, but you may still want to provide some statement in your first paragraph to help guide your reader through your paper.

Expository (Explanatory) Thesis Statement

In an expository paper, you are explaining something to your audience. Your thesis statement contains:

- What you will explain
- The categories you are using to organize your explanation
- The order in which you will present your categories

Example: The lifestyles of barn owls include hunting for insects and animals, building nests, and raising their young.

Argumentative Thesis Statement

In an argumentative essay, you are making a claim and supporting this claim with evidence. The claim may be a position, a proposal, an evaluation, a cause/effect analysis, or an interpretation. The key to argumentation is that you advance a controversial issue. Your thesis statement contains:

- Your claim or assertion
- The evidence that supports the claim
- The order in which you will present your evidence

Example: Both parents should share equally in raising their children because economic necessity usually requires both parents to work outside the home, and shared responsibility gives children the active support of both parents.

Analytical Thesis Statement

In an analytical essay, you are breaking down an issue into its parts, evaluating the issue, and presenting this breakdown and evaluation to your audience. Your thesis statement contains:

- What is being analyzed
- The parts of the analysis
- The order in which you will present the analysis

Example: An analysis of children attending day-care centers reveals two main benefits: interaction with peers and improved self-reliance.

Note: Though a thesis is a very specific statement that should be supported with very specific evidence, it's permissible to *change* your thesis statement as you write and revise your essay. Just be sure to review your thesis before finishing your paper to assure that it accurately reflects your **final** draft.

This handout is a compilation of information drawn from the following sources:

Arlow, Pamela. Wordsmith: a Guide to College Writing. New Jersey: Pearson, 2004.

"Writing a Thesis Statement," by Erin Karper of the Online Writing Lab at Purdue University, August 2002.
<<http://owl.english.purdue.edu>>

