

Thesis Statements

Determine what kind of paper you are writing:

An **analytical** paper breaks down an issue or an idea into its component parts, evaluates the issue or idea, and presents this breakdown and evaluation to the audience.

An **expository** (explanatory) paper explains something to the audience.

An **argumentative** paper makes a claim about a topic and justifies this claim with specific evidence. The claim could be an opinion, a policy proposal, an evaluation, a cause-and-effect statement, or an interpretation. The goal of the argumentative paper is to convince the audience that the claim is true based on the evidence provided.

Example of an expository (explanatory) thesis statement:

The life of the typical college student is characterized by time spent studying, attending class, and socializing with peers.

The paper that follows should:
explain how students spend their time studying, attending class, and socializing with peers.

A strong thesis statement 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 statement. First, it fails to take a stand. Second, the phrase *negative and positive aspects* is 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, and because it's specific.

A strong thesis statement expresses one main idea.

Readers need to be able to see that your paper has one main point. If your thesis statement 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*.

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're writing a seven-to-ten page 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 seven to 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 Haiti because jobs are scarce and farming in the infertile soil is rarely profitable.

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

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.

George Orwell's

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Questions to consider

What is the main idea of your paper in 25 or fewer words?

What is the assignment asking? How can you answer that question AND focus on a small area of investigation?

What "code words" (such as "short-term goals" or "long-term goals") does the draft of my thesis statement contain? Are these words adequately explained?

As you read over your paper, have you supported the thesis or digressed? Where? How?

Assignment for Composition class.

Pick an aspect of Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* 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 and write a thesis statement.

Mark Twain's Huckleberry Finn is a great American novel.

Why is this thesis weak?

- What the reader would expect from the essay that follows: you will most likely provide a general, appreciative summary of Twain's novel.
- The question did not ask you to summarize; it asked you to analyze. Your professor is probably not interested in your opinion of the novel; instead, he/she wants you to think about *why* it's such a great novel—what do Huck's adventures tell us about life, about America, about coming of age, about race relations, etc.?
- The question asks you to 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 analyze this thesis statement:

Here's a working thesis with potential: you have highlighted an important aspect of the novel for investigation;

- however, it's still not clear what your analysis will reveal. Your reader is intrigued, but is still thinking, "So what? What's the point of this contrast? What does it signify?" Perhaps you are not sure yet, either. That's fine—begin to work on comparing scenes from the book and see what you discover. Free write, make lists, jot down Huck's actions and reactions.

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. Of course, for the essay itself to be successful, you must now present evidence from the novel that will convince the reader of your interpretation.

Useful Formulae for Thesis Statements

If you're not sure whether you have a good thesis statement, see whether you can fit your ideas into one of these basic patterns.

[Something] [does something] because [reason(s)].

Because [reason(s)], [something] [does something].

Although [opposing evidence], [reasons] show [something] [does something].

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If you're not sure whether you have a good thesis statement, see whether you can fit your ideas into one of these basic patterns.

[Something] [does something] because [reason(s)].

Goals enable individuals to reach them because goals provide the required momentum for persistence.

Because [reason(s)], [something] [does something].

Because goals are powerful weapons to break down barriers, they are important for success.

Although [opposing evidence], [reasons] show [something] [does something].

Although failure is unpleasant, goals provide the persistence to eventually experience success.

A photograph of a baby and a dog. The baby, on the left, is wearing a white paper hat and is looking directly at the camera. The dog, on the right, is a small, fluffy breed with tan and black fur, looking upwards. The background is dark, and the text "That's All!!" is overlaid in white in the center-right.

That's All!!