

Writing an Effective Thesis Statement

A thesis statement helps unify a paper. It should summarize the main point and guide the paper's development. A thesis statement can be expressed in a sentence or two; however, check with your instructor for particular requirements.

Five General Rules

1. A thesis statement makes an assertion; it is not a simple statement or observation.

Fact or observation: More people are attending community colleges.

Thesis: Community colleges are attracting more students because they offer job training programs as well as academic courses of study.

2. A thesis takes a stand; it does not make an announcement.

Announcement: The thesis of this paper is the difficulty of solving the environmental problems of the Indian River Lagoon.

Thesis: Solving the environmental problems of the Indian River Lagoon will prove more difficult than many people believe.

3. A thesis is a main idea, not a title.

Title: The effect of the Internet on society.

Thesis: Continuing advances in the Internet are having a great impact upon communication in modern society.

4. A thesis statement narrows the topic.

Broad: The American automobile industry has many problems.

Narrow: The primary problem facing the American automobile industry is competition from foreign auto makers.

5. A thesis statement is specific.

Vague: John D. MacDonald's stories are very good.

Specific: John D. MacDonald's stories advanced the thriller genre by employing intelligent dialogue, introducing environmental and economic concerns, and delving into moral issues.

Points to Consider When Writing a Thesis Statement

1. Do not “telegraph” your thesis.

A good thesis does not need to state “This paper will show” or “I hope to show.” Your point should be apparent to readers.

2. How have you explained how? Why?

A good thesis statement often answers the questions how or why. Consider, for example, the following:

The lifestyle of a teenager in the 1960s was very different from the lifestyle of most modern American teenagers.

So what? Why should a reader continue? In what ways are the lifestyles of the youngsters different? Better versions of this statement might be:

Because of advances in technology, the lifestyle of modern American teenagers is very different from the lifestyle of teens in the 1960s. (This statement says why the difference exists)

Or . . .

A young person in the 1960s had fewer options concerning entertainment, education, and career opportunities than do young adults today. (The essay could go on to support what the “options” were.)

3. Use the thesis while writing.

A thesis serves a useful purpose: the writer can check the body of the paper against it, since it promises a reader what will follow. If the body contains other information, such as other major reasons for the differences cited, then the thesis might need to be revised.

4. Provide clear, specific support for the thesis statement.

Example:

High school graduates should be required to take two years off to serve in the military or pursue community service projects before entering college in order to increase their maturity and global awareness.

The paper that follows should present an argument and give evidence to support the claim that students should serve in the military or pursue community projects before entering college.

False Assumptions Concerning Thesis Statements

1. **A thesis statement always comes at the end of the first paragraph.** This is a natural position for a statement of focus, but it's not the only one. Some theses can be stated in the opening sentences of an essay; long research papers might require a paragraph or two of introduction; others might not be fully formulated until the end.
2. **A thesis statement must be one sentence in length.** A complex argument or long research paper might require a tightly-knit paragraph to make an initial statement of position.
3. **You can't start writing an essay until you have a perfect thesis statement.** It is advisable to draft a tentative thesis statement, but changing and refining a thesis is a natural product of research and evolving ideas while writing.
4. **A thesis statement must give three points of support.** A thesis statement should indicate that the essay will explain and give evidence for its assertion, but points don't need to come in any specific number.
5. **Thesis statements cover only one point.** A thesis statement, especially for a longer research paper, might make multiple points.

Example:

The theme, characters, setting, irony, conflicts, viewpoint, and plot all contribute to making Graham Greene's "The Heart of the Matter" a tragedy.

Expanded Thesis Statements

1. **Too simple:** I would like to become an automotive engineer when I finish school.
Detailed: Although both automotive engineers and mechanics can work on cars, automotive engineers differ from mechanics in education, professional opportunities, and creative opportunities.
2. **Too simple:** I enjoy surfing.
Better: A first surfing experience can challenge a person's body and lift her spirits.
3. **Too simple:** Laura Esquivel's "Like Water for Chocolate" is an interesting portrayal of Mexican-American mother-daughter relationships.
Better: In "Like Water for Chocolate," Laura Esquivel uses magical realism to illustrate how cultural, generational, and internal conflicts between Mexican American mothers and daughters all add to the difficulty and character of the human experience.

Some Hints for Writing a Thesis Statement

1. Try using a template sentence:

I am writing about _____, and I am going to argue, show, or prove _____.

What you wrote in the first blank is the topic; what you wrote in the second blank is what focuses your paper.

Example:

I am going to write about the American automobile industry, and I am going to show that it is actually invigorated by foreign competition.

2. Next, refine the sentence.

Example:

The American automobile industry has been invigorated by foreign competition, which has forced it to create more economical production techniques and produce better cars.

Note: In this example, the thesis statement suggests an obvious path for development in "economical production techniques" and "better cars." Two following paragraphs, for example, would logically discuss 1) production techniques and 2) better cars.

3. Then answer these questions concerning your thesis and paper:

What question is my assignment asking?

Am I answering that question and focusing on a small area of investigation?

As I read my paper, have I supported the thesis, or digressed? If so, where? How?