

A Collection of Tips and Tricks for Theses

What is a thesis statement?

A thesis statement:

- tells the reader how you will interpret the significance of the subject matter under discussion.
- is a road map for the paper; in other words, it tells the reader what to expect from the rest of the paper.
- directly answers the question asked of you. A thesis is an interpretation of a question or subject, not the subject itself. The subject, or topic, of an essay might be World War II or Moby Dick; a thesis must then offer a way to understand the war or the novel.
- makes a claim that others might dispute.
- is usually a single sentence somewhere in your first paragraph that presents your argument to the reader. The rest of the paper, the body of the essay, gathers and organizes evidence that will persuade the reader of the logic of your interpretation.

<http://www.unc.edu/depts/wcweb/handouts/thesis.html>

THE THESIS STATEMENT

Many students make the mistake of thinking that having a subject is the same as having a thesis for an essay or research paper. However, the thesis of your writing is much more definite than the general subject. A thesis statement is a specific declaration that summarizes the point of view you will express in your paper. It is the basic stand you take, the opinion you express and the point you make about your narrowed subject. It is your controlling idea, tying together and giving direction to all other elements in your paper. Your primary purpose is to persuade the reader that your thesis is a valid one.

A thesis statement is one of the greatest unifying aspects of a paper. It should act as mortar, holding together the various bricks of a paper, summarizing the main point of the paper "in a nutshell," and pointing toward the paper's development. The thesis statement can help "map" a paper as it suggests an order or direction for the paper's development. A thesis statement, for example, might read:

Judy Syfer's essay, "I Want a Wife," exaggerates the marital expectations facing women in our society today.

The following sentence could continue:

Those expectations include managing a household, maintaining a career, and having a good relationship with a spouse.

In this example, the thesis statement suggests an obvious path for development in "marital expectations." The writer develops the paragraph by exploring the term "marital expectations." Three following paragraphs, for example, would logically discuss 1) household responsibilities, 2) careers, and 3) marital relationships.

A good thesis statement often answers the questions "How?" and/or "Why?". You may encounter a thesis statement that reads:

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

How? In what ways are the lifestyles of the youngsters different? Better versions of this statement might be:

Because of the relative freedom enjoyed by youngsters today, the lifestyle of modern American teenagers is very different from the lifestyle of teens in the Middle Ages.

or

Teenagers in the Middle Ages, who were considered young but responsible adults by the age of sixteen, had very different lifestyles compared to modern American teenagers.

Both of the thesis statements above are improvements because they do not simply state the obvious; they give a reason why or how we can accept the thesis statement.

Now answer these questions:

- What question is my assignment asking?
- How can I answer that question AND focus on a small area of investigation?
- Can I sum up the main idea of my paper in a nutshell? Try this: state or write down, in a sentence or two, the paper's main idea. If you can do that, you're close to having a workable thesis.
- What "code words" (such as "relative freedom" or "lifestyles" above) does the draft of my thesis statement contain? Are these words adequately explained?
- As I read my paper, have I supported the thesis, or digressed?

HOW TO TEST YOUR THESIS:

- Ask, "Is it obvious?" "Having read my thesis, do I feel like reading more?"
- Ask, "Is it trivial?" Think of an anti-thesis to your planned thesis statement. Is your anti-thesis ridiculous? If so your thesis has a good chance of being trivial. Choose worthy opponents when constructing a thesis.
- Ask, "Does my thesis oversimplify a good argument?"

Weak thesis statements answer only "what?" A stronger thesis answers the question "how?" and "why?"

BUT THE STRONGEST THESIS STATEMENTS POSSIBLE GO ON TO ANSWER THE QUESTION "SO WHAT?"

That is, such thesis statement suggest why resolving the problem you present is crucial in understanding some issue.

SOME OPENING STRATEGIES

The beginning of an essay (which will direct the rest of your essay whether or not you have a thesis sentence) is particularly important. It determines how your audience will respond to what follows. Get us excited and we'll give your essay a chance; bore us and you've lost us; confuse and we'll never really follow you, for how well we understand you is largely determined by how well you prepare us

- Begin by setting up a problem (and then solve it)
- Begin with an unusual or surprising observation
- Begin with a paradox (and then untangle it)
- Begin by describing the genesis of your idea
- Begin by setting forth an idea you will later refute
- Begin with a pertinent quote, or juxtapose two quotes whose points you will then discuss.
- Begin with a question
- Begin by opening up various possibilities for interpretation, and end by choosing one from among them
- begin with an anecdote -- a brief, engaging story

<http://instruct1.cit.cornell.edu/Courses/hist100.96/ThesisStatements.html>

Writing a Thesis By Michael Barsanti

1. Think of your thesis as a project. It might be easiest to think about this project as having two parts: the first where you say something about the work at hand (a reading), and a second where you explain what the consequences or uses of this reading are. This approach can be structured as a brief formula:

"I want to show you [something in the text] in order to say [something you should care about]."

2. Your thesis should apply specifically and exclusively to the works at hand. If your thesis could apply to several other works in addition to the one(s) you are writing about, you need to narrow it down.

The story of Kate Swift in Sherwood Anderson's Winesburg, Ohio tells us that communication is important.

This thesis is so vague that you could plug in nearly any story and it would still work.

3. Your thesis must not invoke or rephrase a cliché.

The story of Louise Bentley is a perfect example of "once bitten, twice shy."

4. Your thesis must not make any kind of claim about Society, The History of Mankind, People Since the Beginning of Time, All the People of the World, Everyone Who Ever Lived, etc.
5. Your thesis must do more than express judgments about the characters in the texts. They are not human beings. They do not exist outside the text. They cannot change, no matter how much you may want them to. You may talk about them as having a psychology with motivations and feelings and the like, as long as this discussion is in service of a larger point and shows awareness that the character is a carefully constructed representation inside a carefully and deliberately constructed work.

Instead of:

The Reverend Hartman is a deeply frustrated man.

Try:

Sherwood Anderson uses descriptions of body parts, especially hands, to show that Reverend Hartman is a deeply frustrated man.

<http://www.english.upenn.edu/Grad/Teachweb/mbthesis.html>

Getting an A on an English Paper

Jack Lynch,
Rutgers University – Newark

The Thesis

A good thesis is:

Argumentative. It makes a case. That's the biggest difference between a *thesis* and a *topic* — a topic is something like "Slavery in *Huck Finn*." That's not a case, only a

general area. A *thesis*, on the other hand, makes a specific case, it tries to prove something. One way to tell a thesis from a topic: if it doesn't have an active verb, it's almost certainly still a topic.

Controversial. That doesn't mean something like "Abortionists should be shot" or "George W. Bush's election was illegitimate" — it means that it has to be possible for an intelligent person to *disagree* with your thesis. If everyone agrees on first sight, your thesis is too obvious, and not worth writing about. It also has to be something you can reasonably argue about: it's not enough merely to give an unsupported opinion.

Analytical, not evaluative. A college English paper isn't the place to praise or blame works of literature: theses like "*Paradise Lost* is an enduring expression of the human spirit" or "*The Sound and the Fury* isn't successful in its choice of narrative techniques" aren't appropriate. That's the business of book reviewers. No need to give thumbs-up or thumbs-down; evaluate the work on its own terms.

About the readings, not the real world. Never forget that books are books and, if you're in an English class, you're being asked to talk about *them*. Many books are unreliable guides to the real world outside the texts, and it's dangerous to talk about, say, Renaissance attitudes toward race based only on your reading of *Othello*. Talk about *Othello*.

Specific. It's not enough to deal in vague generalities. Some students want to write their paper on man and God, or on the black experience in the twentieth century. Both are far too nebulous to produce a good paper. Get your hands dirty with the text.

Well supported. That's the key to the rest of the paper after those first few paragraphs.

The thesis statement should appear very close to the beginning of the paper. Some professors want it in a specific place — often the last sentence of the first paragraph. That's as good a position as any, but I prefer not to be rigidly formulaic in such matters. In any case, though, the thesis statement should be very near the beginning (in the first paragraph or two).

Note, though, that just because the thesis should be at the beginning of the reader's experience, it rarely comes at the beginning of the writer's experience. My pals Jeannine DeLombard and Dan White offer this "important hint" for constructing a thesis:

You do not need a refined thesis in order to start writing. If you begin with a *provisional* thesis and then do good and careful close readings, you will often find a version of your final thesis in the *last paragraph of a first draft*. Integrate that version into your first paragraph and revise from there. Do not worry too much about your thesis, therefore,

until *after* you've written out your close readings! A good final thesis should *emerge from*, not precede, your analyses

Of course you have to know exactly what you're saying by the time you finish, but don't let that stop you from beginning to write. The fear of the blank screen — think of the old movie cliché of the would-be writer with the trashcan overflowing with crumpled paper — paralyzes too many people. Theses don't spring into being in their final form.

<http://andromeda.rutgers.edu/~jlynch/EngPaper/thesis.html>

Thesis

An effective essay has an effective thesis, one that respects the subtleties and/or complexities of the essay's topic. A thesis should not be confused with a topic, which represents only the subject area of an essay. A good thesis says something of interest about the topic. Further, it must be arguable; there must be intelligent ways to disagree with it. Arguability distinguishes a good thesis from a fact (clearly demonstrable in the text) or an observation (an interpretation so obvious that no intelligent reader would challenge it). Finding and articulating a thesis is the key task of revision; most college students only announce their topic in a first draft: it takes work to identify the thesis that harbors an essay's real potential. This work is an expectation of college writing.

<http://www.peabody.jhu.edu/1163>