

Thesis Statements: Overview

A thesis statement is a sentence (or two) that presents the main argument of a paper; the thesis typically appears near the beginning of a paper, often at the end of the introduction. A thesis presents a clear idea of the paper to provide the reader a preview of the main findings of the paper.

A thesis statement makes an argument that is debatable. It sets up the reader's expectations. A thesis, therefore, is as helpful as the picture on a jigsaw puzzle box. Without it, readers may become frustrated trying to determine the connection between arguments or come to the wrong conclusion.

Myths

- **A thesis statement must come at the end of the first paragraph of a paper:**
A thesis statement works in conjunction with the introduction. It is not required to be the last sentence if it impedes the logic of the paragraph (EXCEPT if your instructor has explicitly asked for this placement)
- **A thesis statement can only be one sentence, regardless of clarity:**
In the advanced thesis handout, this is covered in more detail. Thesis statements should be clear and easy to read. You can use a series of (typically two) sentences to express the main claim and reasoning of the paper.
- **A thesis statement must be perfect before a paper can be written:**
Having a clear thesis statement at the beginning can help to focus your paper; your argument, however, may change as you engage with your material. Make sure your thesis statement matches the paper you write.
- **A thesis statement must incorporate your three supporting arguments:**
Your thesis statement should give a sense of how you are arguing your paper, but it does not have to be a list. You can have more than three supporting arguments in your paper. You may choose to explain the relationship between your key points and thesis in a series of sentences.
- **Every faculty, department, or course requires the same thesis statement style:**
Depending of what course you're taking, who your professor is, or what your topic is, your thesis statement requirements may change. Some professors require your thesis statement to be a single sentence. Others require you to list your supporting arguments within. Whatever the case, make sure you follow your course outline and listen to your professor's instructions.

'Working' Thesis Statements

A working thesis statement can be helpful for your research and writing process. Writers who develop a tentative thesis early in the research process are less likely to get bogged down in the research process and more likely to be critical readers. A working thesis aids in the judgment of material, content, and importance.

Starting points to thesis development:

When unsure where to start, thesis templates can help you develop a working thesis:

- Formula statements¹
 - The key to formula statements is to state the relationship between the topic, situation/reasoning, and position. As you progress, you should return to the formula and adapt it to mirror your progress.
 - (Topic) + (position) = (reasoning for position)
 - (Specific Topic) + (active verb) + (conditions/context) = position
- Research questions
 - You can also use a series of questions to help refine your topic and argument, particularly when you are unsure of your conclusions.
 - *Craft of Research* (2008)² suggests the following process for developing goals:
 - Topic: I am studying ...
 - Question: because I want to find out what/ why/ how...
 - Significance: in order to help my reader understand ...

Formulating a Thesis Statement

The process of formulating a thesis can facilitate the writing process and help structure the paper. Writers who develop a tentative thesis early in the research process are more likely to address their research material critically. Writers who begin their papers with a clear thesis are less likely to produce papers that are poorly structured or off topic. Here are a few examples of weak, better, and the best thesis statements:

Weak: Some movies made for theatres are censored before being shown on television.
This states a fact, not a contestable argument.

Weak: This essay will examine the arguments for and against censoring movies on television.
This is a statement of the topic; it does not reflect a point of view.

Weak: The censoring of movies shown on television is a controversial topic.
Again, this statement presents a fact with no clear position.

Weak: Should movies be censored when shown on television?
This is a question, and does not reveal the writer's position.

Weak: I am opposed to the censoring of movies shown on television.
Better, but the emphasis on 'I' reduces the impact of the thesis.

Better: Movies made for theatres should not be censored before being shown on television.
This thesis presents a definite viewpoint, but no reasoning is given.

Best: Current television regulations violate the producers' right to freedom of artistic expression and the viewer's right to freedom of choice, because they do not acknowledge how context changes how one understands content and word choice.
This thesis presents a definite position or argument and highlights the reasons supporting the argument. Note how this version of the thesis also helps the readers anticipate the structure of the paper to follow.

¹ Based on: Rosenwasser, D., & Stephen, J. (2000). *Writing analytically*. Philadelphia, PA: Harcourt College Publishers.

² Booth, W., Colomb, G., & Williams, J. (2008). *The craft of research*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press.

Common Mistakes

The bad: Thesis statements that don't argue anything

- The Canadian government hasn't had a coalition government since 1920.
- Coalition governments have been successful in Australia, Germany and Israel.

The ugly: Thesis statements that introduce the topic, but don't reflect a point of view

- This essay will examine the argument for and against coalition governments in parliamentary democracy.
- Should Canada consider a coalition government as a reflection of voter's preferences?

The good: Thesis statements that take a position on an issue

- I am opposed to a coalition government in Canada. (Note: weak, "I" reduces impact; also, why are you opposed?)
- A Canadian coalition government would reflect the voters' choices. (Note: weak because it tells a position but not how it would be supported).
- Although coalition governments have functioned in other countries, a Canadian coalition government would be ineffective because it would increase regionalism, lengthen parliamentary debate, and likely lead to more frequent elections. (Note: Stronger because it takes a position and offers how it will be supported).

A thesis statement checklist³

- Does my thesis demonstrate analysis?
- Does my thesis pass the "so what" question by supporting its relevance?
- Does my thesis show that I am focused on depth, not breadth?
- Does my thesis reflect the argument that I use in my conclusion?
- Is my thesis clear and concise?
- Would the reader be able to understand my paper organization and topic from the introduction?

³ Based on: Procter, M. (n.d.) *Using thesis statements*. Retrieved November 2, 2010 from <http://www.writing.utoronto.ca>