

Thesis Statement: How to Make it Stronger

What is Thesis Statement

The **Thesis Statement** is that sentence or two in your text that contains the focus of your essay and tells your reader what the essay is going to be about.

You may think of a thesis statement as an umbrella: everything that you carry along in your essay has to fit under this umbrella, and if you try to take on packages that don't fit, you will either have to get a bigger umbrella or something's going to get wet.

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 of a question or subject, not the subject itself.
e.g. 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 (or two) 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.

Is Essay Without a Thesis Statement Possible?

Although it is sometimes possible to write a good essay without a thesis statement (many narrative essays, for example, contain only an implied thesis statement), the lack of a thesis statement may well be a symptom of an essay beset by a lack of focus (this must not be a case for University and Master's writers).

How Do I Get a Thesis?

A thesis is the result of a lengthy thinking process. Formulating a thesis is not the first thing you do after reading an essay assignment. Before you develop an argument on any topic, you have to collect and organize evidence, look for possible relationships between known facts and think about the significance of these relationships. Once you do this thinking, you will probably have a "working thesis," a basic or main idea, an argument that you think you can support with evidence.

The thesis statement should remain flexible until the paper is actually finished. If you discover new information in the process of writing your paper that ought to be included in the thesis statement, then you'll have to rewrite your thesis statement. On the other hand, if you discover

that your paper has done adequate work but the thesis statement appears to include things that you haven't actually addressed, then you need to limit that thesis statement.

What Is a Strong Thesis?

Very often, writers include a thesis statement to the introduction. However, it is not strong enough.

To make your thesis strong, ask yourself seven questions:

Where is my thesis statement?

You should provide a thesis early in your essay — in the introduction, or in longer essays in the second paragraph — in order to establish your position and give your reader a sense of direction.

Do I answer the question?

Re-reading the question prompt after constructing a working thesis can help you fix an argument that misses the focus of the question.

Have I taken a position that others might challenge or oppose?

If your thesis simply states facts that no one would, or even could, disagree with, it's possible that you are simply providing a summary, rather than making an argument.

Is my thesis statement specific enough?

Thesis statements that are too vague often do not have a strong argument. Your thesis should be limited to what can be accomplished in the specified number of pages. Shape your topic so that you can get straight to the "meat" of it e.g. If your thesis contains words like "good" or "successful", see if you could be more specific: why is something "good"; what specifically makes something "successful"?

Compare this original thesis (too general) with three possible revisions (more focused, each presenting a different approach to the same topic):

Original thesis (weak):

There are serious objections to today's horror movies.

Revised theses (strong):

- Because modern cinematic techniques have allowed filmmakers to get more graphic, horror flicks have desensitized young American viewers to violence.
- The pornographic violence in "bloodbath" slasher movies degrades both men and women.

- Today's slasher movies fail to deliver the emotional catharsis that 1930s horror films did.

Is my thesis statement clear?

Your thesis statement is no exception to your writing: it needs to be as clear as possible. By being as clear as possible in your thesis statement, you will make sure that your reader understands exactly what you mean.

Tip: In order to be as clear as possible in your writing:

- Unless you're writing a technical report, avoid technical language. Always avoid jargon, unless you are confident your audience will be familiar with it.
- Avoid vague words such as "interesting", "negative", "exciting", "unusual", and "difficult".
- Avoid abstract words such as "society", "values", or "culture".

These words tell the reader next to nothing if you do not carefully explain what you mean by them. Never assume that the meaning of a sentence is obvious. Check to see if you need to define your terms ("socialism", "conventional", "commercialism", "society"), and then decide on the most appropriate place to do so. Do not assume, for example, that you have the same understanding of what "society" means as your reader. To avoid misunderstandings, be as specific as possible.

Compare the original thesis (not specific and clear enough) with the revised version (much more specific and clear):

Original thesis (weak):

Although the timber wolf is a timid and gentle animal, it is being systematically exterminated. [if it's so timid and gentle, why is it being exterminated?]

Revised thesis (strong):

Although the timber wolf is actually a timid and gentle animal, it is being systematically exterminated because people wrongfully believe it to be a fierce and cold-blooded killer.

Does my thesis include a comment about my position on the issue at hand?

The thesis statement should do more than merely announce the topic; it must reveal what position you will take in relation to that topic, how you plan to analyze/evaluate the subject or the issue. In short, instead of merely stating a general fact or resorting to a simplistic pro/con statement, you must decide what it is you have to say.

Tips:

- Avoid merely announcing the topic; your original and specific "angle" should be clear. In this way you will tell your reader why your take on the issue matters.

- Avoid making universal or pro/con judgments that oversimplify complex issues.
- When you make a (subjective) judgment call, specify and justify your reasoning. "Just because" is not a good reason for an argument.
- Avoid merely reporting a fact. Say more than what is already proven fact. Go further with your ideas. Otherwise... why would your point matter?
- Though it is not a strict rule, it is better not to announce the thesis statement as if it were a thesis statement using phrases such as "The purpose of this paper is..." or "In this paper, I will attempt to...".

Compare the original thesis (not specific and clear enough) with the revised version (much more specific and clear):

Original thesis (weak):

In this paper, I will discuss the relationship between fairy tales and early childhood (not specific; "why does the topic matter?").

Revised thesis (strong):

Not just empty stories for kids, fairy tales shed light on the psychology of young children.

Original thesis (weak):

We must save the whales (just a universal claim; no reason stated).

Revised thesis (strong):

Because our planet's health may depend upon biological diversity, we should save the whales.

Original thesis (weak):

Socialism is the best form of government for Kenya (subjective; not justified).

Revised thesis (strong):

If the government takes over industry in Kenya, it will become more efficient.

Original thesis (weak):

Hoover's administration was rocked by scandal (thesis just reports a fact).

Revised thesis (strong):

The many scandals of Hoover's administration revealed basic problems with the Republican Party's nominating process.

Is my thesis statement original?

Avoid generic arguments and formula statements. They work well to get a rough draft started, but will easily bore a reader. Keep revising until the thesis reflects your real ideas.

Tip: The point you make in the paper should matter:

- Be prepared to answer "So what?" about your thesis statement.
- Be prepared to explain why the point you are making is worthy of a paper. Why should the reader read it?

Compare the following:

Original thesis (weak):

There are advantages and disadvantages to using statistics (**a fill-in-the-blank formula**).

Revised theses (strong):

- Careful manipulation of data allows a researcher to use statistics to support any claim she desires.
- In order to ensure accurate reporting, journalists must understand the real significance of the statistics they report.
- Because advertisers consciously and unconsciously manipulate data, every consumer should learn how to evaluate statistical claims.

Avoid formula and generic words. Search for concrete subjects and active verbs, revising as many "to be" verbs as possible. A few suggestions below show how specific word choice sharpens and clarifies your meaning.

Original (pretends to be a weak thesis):

"Society is..." [who is this "society" and what exactly is it doing?]

Revised (pretends to be a strong thesis):

"Men and women will learn how to...", "writers can generate...", "television addicts may chip away at...", "American educators must decide...", "taxpayers and legislators alike can help fix..."

Original (pretends to be a weak thesis):

"the media"

Revised (pretends to be a strong thesis):

"the new breed of television reporters", "advertisers", "hard-hitting print journalists", "horror flicks", "TV movies of the week", "sitcoms", "national public radio..."

Original (pretends to be a weak thesis):

"is, are, was, to be" or "to do, to make"

Revised (pretends to be a strong thesis):

any great action verb you can concoct: "to generate", "to demolish", "to batter", "to revolt", "to discover", "to flip", "to signify", "to endure..."

By contrast...

Five kinds of weak thesis statements — ones that

- make no claim ("This paper will examine the pros and cons of...");
- are obviously true or are a statement of fact ("Exercise is good for you");
- restate conventional wisdom ("Love conquers all");
- offer personal conviction as the basis for the claim ("Shopping malls are wonderful places");
and
- make an overly broad claim ("Individualism is good").

Study More Examples

Step 1:

You read the essay assignment, which runs: Compare and contrast the reasons why the North and South fought the Civil War. Your first thesis statement is:

The North and South fought the Civil War for many reasons, some of which were the same and some different.

This weak thesis restates the question without providing any additional information. You will expand on this new information in the body of the essay, but it is important that the reader know where you are heading. A reader of this weak thesis might think, "What reasons? How are they the same? How are they different?" Ask yourself these same questions and begin to compare Northern and Southern attitudes (perhaps you first think, "The South believed slavery was right, and the North thought slavery was wrong"). Now, push your comparison toward an interpretation — why did one side think slavery was right and the other side think it was wrong? You look again at the evidence, and you decide that you are going to argue that the North believed slavery was immoral while the South believed it upheld the Southern way of life.

Step 2:

After such an analysis you write:

While both sides fought the Civil War over the issue of slavery, the North fought for moral reasons while the South fought to preserve its own institutions.

Now you have a working thesis! Included in this working thesis is a reason for the war and some idea of how the two sides disagreed over this reason. As you write the essay, you will probably begin to characterize these differences more precisely, and your working thesis may start to seem too vague. Maybe you decide that both sides fought for moral reasons, and that they just focused on different moral issues.

Step 3:

You end up revising the working thesis into a final thesis that really captures the argument in your paper:

While both Northerners and Southerners believed they fought against tyranny and oppression, Northerners focused on the oppression of slaves while Southerners defended their own right to self-government.

Compare this to the original weak thesis. This final thesis presents a way of interpreting evidence that illuminates the significance of the question. Keep in mind that this is one of many possible interpretations of the Civil War — it is not the one and only right answer to the question. There isn't one right answer; there are only strong and weak thesis statements and strong and weak uses of evidence.