

How to Write a Thesis Statement

When we read papers, almost all of us search early on for a one sentence summary of what the essay is going to tell us. We refer to that summary as the thesis statement of the paper.

WHY SHOULD YOUR ESSAY CONTAIN A THESIS STATEMENT?

A thesis statement: ↪ allows you to synthesize your ideas by condensing them into a sentence. ↪ allows you to organize and develop your argument better. ↪ provides your reader with a kind of “cheat sheet” to your argument. In general, your thesis statement will accomplish these goals if you think of it as the answer to the question your paper is going to explore.

HOW DO I GENERATE A THESIS STATEMENT IF THE PAPER TOPIC IS ASSIGNED?

Almost all assignments, no matter how complicated, can be reduced to a single question. Your first step in writing your paper is to determine what specific question you want your paper to answer. For example, your professor might give you the following topic assignment: “Presidential Scandal.” This might lead you to answer the question, “Which presidential scandal in recent history had the most impact on public opinion?” After you have chosen what one question you would like to answer, figure out a way to summarize that answer into a one sentence statement. So, going back to our prior example, you might summarize your statement as:

After thirty years, the Watergate Scandal has continued to color the way the American public views the sitting president.

-or-

Although many Americans today think little about the Watergate scandal, its impact is still visible when looking at the public’s generally negative view of the sitting president.

-or-

When Watergate broke, few would have predicted that it would increase the wariness with which Americans view their president for at least three decades.

HOW DO I GENERATE A THESIS IF THE TOPIC IS NOT ASSIGNED?

If your assignment does not ask a specific question or if there is no specific assignment, your thesis statement still needs to answer a question about an issue you would like to explore. Your job is to figure out what issue you would like that to be. Some guidelines to consider about good thesis statements are: ↪ They deal with a subject that can be fully addressed given the nature of the assignment. ↪ They express one main idea. ↪ They take on a subject upon which people could reasonably disagree. ↪ They assert your own conclusion about a topic. Here’s an example of how to generate a thesis for a paper in psychology. Let’s say that your class focuses on developmental psychology. You find that you are interested in how decision making skills develop in teenagers. You might begin by describing the topic in a single phrase:

Adolescent decision making skills.

This fragment is not a thesis statement, rather it indicates a general subject that requires more description, including your own argument on the topic.

Perhaps your readings on the topic have led you to believe that certain factors, such as a tendency to look at short rather than long term consequences illustrate the difference between adolescent and adult decision making skills. The next step of your thesis might look like this:

Adolescent and adult decision making skills differ.

This brief sentence not only announces your subject, but also it focuses on your main idea: that there is a difference in adolescent and adult decision making skills. Further, it raises a subject on which people can disagree; while some will agree that adolescent and adult decision making skills differ, many feel that by the time you reach adolescence, your decision making abilities are similar if not identical to adults' skills. Still, this sentence is not a thesis statement because your reader does not know enough about your conclusion on the topic.

After reflecting a bit on the topic, you decide that what you really want to say on the topic is that these differences are particularly evident in the court systems. You revise your statement to read:

Adolescent and adult decision making skills differ in the court system.

This statement asserts your position, but the expressions "differ" and "court system setting" are vague. You need to be more specific:

Within the legal system, adolescents are less able to take into account the long term consequences of their decision making than adults, and therefore are less competent to make legal decisions.

Notice how this answers the question, "How does the difference between adult and adolescent decision making skills affect adolescents when making legal decisions?" When you began conceptualizing this paper, you probably did not have that specific question in mind, but as you became more involved in the topic, your ideas became more focused. Your thesis began to reflect that focus and became more specific. Just as your ideas changed as you developed your thesis, they may continue to change as you write your paper. Keep in mind that your initial thesis statement can be revised as you formulate the paper, reflecting your changing ideas about your topic.

HOW DO I DISTINGUISH A STRONG THESIS FROM A WEAK ONE?

1. A strong thesis takes some sort of position.

Remember that your thesis reflects your conclusions on a topic. For example, if you are writing a paper for a world literature class, you might be asked to pick a fairy tale and evaluate how young children who hear it might develop different gender stereotypes that reflect the fairy tale. Here are two thesis statements for the preceding topic:

The fairy tale "Sleeping Beauty" may have positive and negative effects on the moral development of children.

This is a weak thesis, because it fails to take a stand on the topic. Further, the phrase "may have positive and negative effects" is ambiguous.

While many children love to hear the story of "Sleeping Beauty", the message it sends young girls about passively waiting for their "prince" to come facilitates the development of a more submissive personality.

This is a strong thesis because it takes a stand and is specific.

2. A strong thesis justifies discussion.

It should be possible for people to reasonably disagree on the subject you are exploring in your paper. A good thesis specifies *your* opinion on a topic, and people with an interest in the topic should want to discuss it. For example, you are assigned to write a paper on seasonal botany. You should describe a specific example of seasonal botany. Here are two possible thesis statements, one weak and one strong:

Roses are redder in the summer time.

This is a weak thesis statement because it merely states an observation. It does not justify discussion, so the reader is unlikely to want to continue reading your paper after reading your thesis statement.

The sun's rays stimulate photosynthesis, creating brighter and more vivid color in roses during summer months.

This is a strong thesis because it shows how your opinion challenges the general view, thereby justifying further discussion. After reading this kind of statement, your reader will want to keep reading to find out how you could support it.

3. A strong thesis expresses one main idea.

Readers need to see that your paper has only one main point. If you are trying to get across more than one point, your reader is likely to get confused about your paper topic. For example:

College life can be overwhelming and many students first live on their own as they enter school.

This is a weak thesis statement because the reader does not have a clear picture of what the point of the paper is. To revise the statement, a clear connection between the two statements should be delineated in the thesis.

Since many college students first live on their own as they enter school, college can be the first “high stress” time in their lives.

This is a strong statement because it shows the relationship between two ideas. Hint: many clear and engrossing thesis statements contain key words such as “since,” “although,” “unless,” “so,” “however,” “therefore,” and “because.”

4. A strong thesis statement is specific.

It tells your reader precisely what your paper is about. Making your thesis statement specific will also help you restrict your paper to a manageable topic. For example, if you are writing a seven to ten page paper on the causes of the American Revolution, you might write:

There were many causes of the American Revolution.

This is a weak thesis statement for two reasons. First, the causes of the American Revolution cannot be discussed thoroughly in seven to ten pages. Second, “were many causes” is a vague statement. It is necessary to choose a part of this topic to discuss.

A desire for self-determination and religious freedom led the founding fathers to declare independence from England.

This is a strong thesis statement because it narrows the subject to a more specific and manageable topic, and it also identifies a specific cause of the American Revolution.

Remember: A strong thesis statement takes a position, justifies further discussion, expresses one main idea, and is specific.

Material for this pamphlet was obtained from: The Indiana University Writing Tutorial Thesis Statement Pamphlet, available at: http://www.indiana.edu/~wts/pamphlets/thesis_statement.shtml.

For additional writing help, please visit the Undergraduate Writing Lab in M-8 or call (858) 635-4439 for an appointment.

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