



# Thesis Statements

The **thesis** of an essay is its main idea. The **thesis statement** of an essay is the one- or two-sentence statement that expresses this main idea. The thesis statement identifies the writer's topic and the opinion the writer has about that topic. For example, an essay could have this thesis:

*The current television rating system does little to help parents make wise programming choices for their children.*

This thesis statement presents both the essay's topic and the writer's opinion:

**Topic:** *the current television rating system*

**Writer's opinion:** *It does little to help parents decide what children should watch.*

Because the thesis statement lets readers know what to expect, it should appear early in the essay. Often the thesis appears as the last sentence in the introduction.

**Why is a thesis statement necessary?** The thesis statement performs two functions:

First, the *writer* creates a thesis to focus the essay's subject. If a writer cannot sum up the essay's main idea in one or two sentences, then she probably does not yet clearly grasp the topic. In this way, writing a thesis statement tests the writer's clarity of thought. Once the writer decides on the paper's main focus, the thesis statement additionally serves as a guide to remind the writer to keep the essay focused and organized.

Second, the presence of a good thesis statement aids *reader* understanding. A hallmark of a well-organized essay is a thesis-support structure. That is, the thesis statement announces the essay's topic; then the body of the essay further explains and supports that topic. In other words, the thesis statement creates an expectation in the reader's mind about what will follow in the rest of the essay. When the body paragraphs fulfill this reader expectation, the paper feels well organized and the content makes sense. If the thesis statement is misleading, however, or missing altogether, the body of the paper can seem confusing or irrelevant because it is not viewed in relation to the paper's overall topic (the thesis). Thus, the thesis statement is important because it answers the reader's question, "Why are you telling me this?"

## **Strategy:**

Because the thesis statement is so important, the writer must shape it carefully, and that means approaching the first draft with a preliminary thesis statement in mind.

A preliminary thesis statement is an early version of the thesis statement; it is the version used to guide the first draft, to help focus and organize it. The preliminary thesis statement states the essay's topic and the writer's opinion of the topic, but it does so in an early, rough form. Like everything else in a first draft, the preliminary thesis statement is subject to change—that is why it is called "preliminary." In fact, this thesis statement is so preliminary that it may bear little or no resemblance to the thesis statement in the final version of the essay because, in the course of drafting and revising, the writer may decide to shift focus or change topics dramatically. Because writing is an ongoing act of discovery and revision, such changes are common and not a source of concern.

Once the writer has chosen a writing topic, established a purpose, identified the audience, and discovered ideas for developing the topic, it is time to shape the preliminary thesis. When doing so, consider the following qualities of an effective thesis statement:

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- **A good thesis statement clearly suggests an essay's direction, emphasis, and scope.**

A thesis statement should not make promises that the essay will not fulfill. It should suggest how ideas are related and where the emphasis will lie.

- **A good thesis statement is neither too broad nor too narrow.**

The thesis determines the scope of an essay. If a thesis is too broad, the essay will be superficial. On the other hand, if a thesis is too narrow, the essay will have nowhere to go. Of course, making the thesis statement just right depends on the specifics of the assignment being addressed, but here's a rough example of how narrow a thesis statement should be.

- **Too Broad:** Everybody has bad days sometimes.
- **Too Narrow:** I had a bad day yesterday.
- **Just Right:** Every time I have a bad day, I learn something about myself.

- **A good thesis statement usually argues a point of view.**

Remember, an effective thesis statement should state the writer's opinion about a given topic. Thus, in college writing, thesis statements are almost always argumentative. Whether the thesis argues one side of a social debate or merely argues for a certain interpretation of a piece of literature, the thesis will almost always presents some viewpoint that can be questioned or challenged by the reader. It should not merely announce the paper's subject or make a factual statement about a topic. To test whether a thesis is argumentative, ask whether a person could argue against it. If the statement can be argued against, the thesis is argumentative. If it cannot be argued against, then it is probably factual and lacks the writer's opinion.

- **Not Argumentative (announcement of paper's subject):** I want to share some thoughts with you about our space program.
- **Not Argumentative (statement of fact):** The United States space program grew extensively during the cold war.
- **Argumentative:** Investing money in our space program is a misuse of taxpayers' dollars.

- **A good thesis statement is concise.**

Because the thesis statement's purpose is to make the paper topic clear, the sentence itself should be clear and concise, only giving the most relevant information.

- **A good thesis statement is specific, not vague.**

Make sure the thesis statement contains specific language.

- Too Vague: Hemingway's war stories are really good.
- More Specific: Hemingway's war stories helped to create a new prose style.

- **A good thesis statement is strong.**

The thesis statement should be as strong as possible. This means avoiding weak phrasing such as “in my opinion,” “I believe,” “I think,” and “it seems to me.” Since you, the writer, wrote the paper, it is obvious that the content of the paper is your opinion; you don't need to tell your reader.

\* This handout was adapted with permission from a similar one used by Columbia College's Academic Achievement Center.