

Writing a Thesis Statement

A thesis is a concise, narrow statement of the main claim or argument of the essay.

A thesis:

- Tells the reader how you will interpret the significance of the subject matter under discussion.
- Is a road map for the paper – tells the reader what to expect from the rest of the paper.
- Directly answers the question in the prompt or your research question.

Is an interpretation of a subject or topic, NOT the topic itself. The thesis offers a way to understand the topic. e.g. The topic of the paper is *Avatar*, but the thesis is that *Avatar* is a well filmed movie with poor plot and dialogue that is successful solely on the basis of its special effects.

- Makes a claim that is disputable or arguable, and is not a statement of fact.
- Is usually (though not necessarily) a single sentence near the end of your introduction that presents your argument to the reader.
- Is a promise to the reader of what the essay is about.

Steps for thesis creation:

1. Determine what kind of paper you are writing:
 - An **analytical** paper breaks down an issue or an idea into its component parts, evaluates the issue or idea, and presents this breakdown and evaluation to the audience.
 - An **expository** (explanatory) paper explains something to the audience.
 - An **argumentative** paper makes a claim about a topic and justifies this claim with specific evidence. The claim could be an opinion, a policy proposal, an evaluation, a cause-and-effect statement, or an interpretation. The goal of the argumentative paper is to convince the audience that the claim is true based on the evidence provided.

If you are writing a text which does not fall under these three categories (ex. a narrative), a thesis statement somewhere in the first paragraph could still be helpful to your reader.

2. Your thesis statement should be specific—it should cover only what you will discuss in your paper and should be supported with specific evidence.
3. The thesis statement usually appears at the end of the first paragraph of a paper.
4. Your topic may change as you write, so you may need to revise your thesis statement to reflect exactly what you have discussed in the paper.

Examples

Example of an **analytical thesis** statement:

An analysis of the college admission process reveals one challenge facing counselors: accepting students with high test scores or students with strong extracurricular backgrounds.

The paper that follows should:

- explain the analysis of the college admission process
- explain the challenge facing admissions counselors

Example of an **expository (explanatory) thesis** statement:

The life of the typical college student is characterized by time spent studying, attending class, and socializing with peers.

The paper that follows should:

- explain how students spend their time studying, attending class, and socializing with peers

Example of an **argumentative thesis** statement:

High school graduates should be required to take a year off to pursue community service projects before entering college in order to increase their maturity and global awareness.

The paper that follows should:

- present an argument and give evidence to support the claim that students should pursue community projects before entering college

Tips for Revising a Thesis

The writing process is recursive – that is, a good paper is continually revised as the writer goes along. A thesis is the same way. As the paper develops, the writer may discover the argument going in a different direction than expected. This may lead to a revision of the thesis, which may lead to revisions of the essay, which leads to further revisions of the thesis...

You can ask these questions to determine if your final thesis is strong:

- *Does it answer the question?*
- *Can it be challenged or opposed?*
- *Is it specific enough?*
- *Does it express its significance to the reader?*
- *Does the essay support it without wandering?*
- *Does it answer “how” or “why”?*

Working and Final Theses:

Oftentimes, a thesis that helps the writer keep his or her paper on track and organize his or her thoughts is not the same as a thesis that will help the reader follow the writer’s argument clearly.

Therefore, after a paper is written, it is a good idea to see if your thesis is appropriate for you as a writer or for a reader.

Some examples of the evolution of a thesis:

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

Working Thesis: 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.

Revised, Final Thesis: 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.

Weak Thesis: Mark Twain’s *Huckleberry Finn* is a great American novel.

Working Thesis: In *Huckleberry Finn*, Mark Twain develops a contrast between life on the river and life on the shore.

Revised, Final Thesis: Through its contrasting river and shore scenes, Twain’s *Huckleberry Finn* suggests that to find the true expression of American democratic ideals, one must leave “civilized” society and go back to nature.

*Compiled from the UNC Writing Center Website and the OWL at Purdue University.