

Overcoming the Thesis Statement: A Tip Sheet

Thesis: a statement in which a writer affirms or defends the specific idea that will focus or organize a paper

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.

E.g., Examination of the eating patterns of children between the ages 10-12 shows a startling association between junk food and obesity.

- An **expository** (explanatory) paper explains something to the audience.

E.g., The veto power that the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council have makes it difficult for the UN to take a stand.

- An **argumentative** paper makes a claim about a topic and justifies this claim with specific evidence. The goal of the paper is to convince the audience that the claim is true based on evidence provided.

E.g., 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.

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

2) Be specific.

Your thesis statement should only cover what you will discuss in your paper and should be supported with specific evidence. Avoid overused, general terms and concepts. It should clearly and concisely express a main idea and be supported by convincing reason and relevant examples from sources.

3) Ensure that your thesis includes two parts:

- a) It tells WHY or WHAT you plan to argue; it makes a claim that would generate discussion.
- b) It explains HOW you plan to argue. Think of your thesis as a road map; it indicates the direction of your argument and suggests the structure for your paper. *A thesis is not a subject itself but an interpretation of a subject or question.*

Cautions:

- *A thesis is never a question, topic, announcement, or list*
- *A thesis should never be vague, combative or confrontational*
- *An effective thesis cannot be answered with a simple "yes" or "no"*
- *An effective thesis has a definable, arguable claim*

4) Anticipate the counter-arguments.

Once you have a tentative thesis, you should think about what might be said against it. (Every argument has a counter-argument. If yours doesn't, then it's not an argument.) A good thesis can reflect a tension between affirming and negating arguments. Building this tension into the wording of your thesis can make a stronger statement.

E.g., Although standardized tests such as the SAT are usually considered a valid method of assessment and are widely used in college admissions, these tests do not accurately reflect a student's knowledge or ability.

IMPORTANT: Do not expect to come up with a fully formulated thesis statement before you have finished writing the paper. Your thesis will inevitably change as you revise and refine your ideas—and that's okay! Start with a tentative or *working* thesis and revise it as your paper develops.

Developing a Literary Thesis Statement: An Example

1) **Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* is a great American novel.**

What's wrong with this thesis statement?

It is an opinion, not an argument.

2) **In *Huckleberry Finn*, Mark Twain develops a contrast between life on the river and life on the shore.**

Better? How so? What is still missing?

While this thesis statement is better, it does not answer the "so what?" question. What is the point of the contrast? What does the contrast signify?

3) **Through its contrasting river and shore scenes, Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* suggests that to find the true expression of American ideals one must leave civilized society and return to nature.**

This is a strong thesis statement because it answers the "so what" question and interprets a literary work based on an analysis of its content.

More examples: Different approaches to the same topic

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

Improved: (Two options):

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

2) In the American Civil War, although both the North and South believed they fought against tyranny and oppression, the Northerners fought for freedom from slave oppression while Southerners defended their right to self-government.

Five Counterfeit Thesis Statements to Avoid

The Non-Thesis Thesis

This "thesis" does not take a position; rather, it makes a neutral statement that lacks support and structure.

Poor: In his article, Stanley Fish shows that we *don't really* have the right to free speech.

Better: In his article, Stanley Fish shows that through government legislation and censorship, we *no longer* have the right to free speech.

The Overly Broad Thesis

This "thesis" is not specific or tailored enough to reflect the scope of the paper

Poor: The government has the right to limit free speech.

Better: The government has the right to limit free speech in cases of racist or sexist language because failure to do so would imply that our society condones such ignorant and hateful views.

The Indisputable Thesis

This "thesis" cannot be argued since it does not present a view that someone might reasonably oppose.

Poor: Although we have the right to say what we want, we should avoid hurting other people's feelings.

Better: The "fighting words" exception to free speech is not legitimate because it mistakenly considers speech as an action.

The Overly Ambitious Thesis

This "thesis" requires more support or resources than are necessary or allowed for the specified paper.

Poor: Hate speech can inflict emotional pain and suffering just as intensely as physical battery.

Better: The various arguments against the regulation of hate speech depend on the unexamined assumption that emotional pain is trivial.

The "List Essay" Thesis

This "thesis" is a list of elements that does not adequately connect the main ideas and provides no structure for the essay.

Poor: Crime has declined because more people are in prison, the population is getting older, and DNA testing improves investigations.

Better: It is more likely that crime has declined due to improvements in DNA testing and the consequent ability to put more criminals in prison, than because the population is aging.