

Developing A Thesis

Think of yourself as a member of a jury, listening to a lawyer who is presenting an opening argument. You'll want to know very soon whether the lawyer believes the accused to be guilty or not guilty, and how the lawyer plans to convince you. Readers of academic essays are like jury members: before they have read too far, they want to know what the essay argues as well as how the writer plans to make the argument. After reading your thesis statement, the reader should think, "This essay is going to try to convince me of something. I'm not convinced yet, but I'm interested to see how I might be."

An effective thesis cannot be answered with a simple "yes" or "no." A thesis is not a topic; nor is it a fact; nor is it an opinion. "Reasons for the fall of communism" is a topic. "Communism collapsed in Eastern Europe" is a fact known by educated people. "The fall of communism is the best thing that ever happened in Europe" is an opinion. (Superlatives like "the best" almost always lead to trouble. It's impossible to weigh every "thing" that ever happened in Europe. And what about the fall of Hitler? Couldn't that be "the best thing"?)

A good thesis has two parts. It should tell what you plan to argue, and it should "telegraph" how you plan to argue—that is, what particular support for your claim is going where in your essay.

Steps in Constructing a Thesis

First, analyze your primary sources. Look for tension, interest, ambiguity, controversy, and/or complication. Does the author contradict himself or herself? Is a point made and later reversed? What are the deeper implications of the author's argument? Figuring out the why to one or more of these questions, or to related questions, will put you on the path to developing a working thesis. (Without the why, you probably have only come up with an observation—that there are, for instance, many different metaphors in such-and-such a poem—which is not a thesis.)

Once you have a working thesis, write it down. There is nothing as frustrating as hitting on a great idea for a thesis, then forgetting it when you lose concentration. And by writing down your thesis you will be forced to think of it clearly, logically, and concisely. You probably will not be able to write out a final-draft version of your thesis the first time you try, but you'll get yourself on the right track by writing down what you have.

Keep your thesis prominent in your introduction. A good, standard place for your thesis statement is at the end of an introductory paragraph, especially in shorter (5-15 page) essays. Readers are used to finding theses there, so they automatically pay more attention when they read the last sentence of your introduction. Although this is not required in all academic essays, it is a good rule of thumb.

Anticipate the counter-arguments. Once you have a working thesis, you should think about what might be said against it. This will help you to refine your thesis, and it will also make you think of the arguments that you'll need to refute later on in your essay. (Every argument has a counter-argument. If yours doesn't, then it's not an argument—it may be a fact, or an opinion, but it is not an argument.)

Michael Dukakis lost the 1988 presidential election because he failed to campaign vigorously after the Democratic National Convention.

This statement is on its way to being a thesis. However, it is too easy to imagine possible counter-arguments. For example, a political observer might believe that Dukakis lost because he suffered from a "soft-on-crime" image. If you complicate your thesis by anticipating the counter-argument, you'll strengthen your argument, as shown in the sentence below.

While Dukakis' "soft-on-crime" image hurt his chances in the 1988 election, his failure to campaign vigorously after the Democratic National Convention bore a greater responsibility for his defeat.

Some Caveats and Some Examples

A thesis is never a question. Readers of academic essays expect to have questions discussed, explored, or even answered. A question ("Why did communism collapse in Eastern Europe?") is not an argument, and without an argument, a thesis is dead in the water.

A thesis is never a list. "For political, economic, social and cultural reasons, communism collapsed in Eastern Europe" does a good job of "telegraphing" the reader what to expect in the essay—a section about political reasons, a section about economic reasons, a section about social reasons, and a section about cultural reasons. However, political, economic, social and cultural reasons are pretty much the only possible reasons why communism could collapse. This sentence lacks tension and doesn't advance an argument. Everyone knows that politics, economics, and culture are important.

A thesis should never be vague, combative or confrontational. An ineffective thesis would be, "Communism collapsed in Eastern Europe because communism is evil." This is hard to argue (evil from whose perspective? what does evil mean?) and it is likely to mark you as moralistic and judgmental rather than rational and thorough. It also may spark a defensive reaction from readers sympathetic to communism. If readers strongly disagree with you right off the bat, they may stop reading.

An effective thesis has a definable, arguable claim. "While cultural forces contributed to the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe, the disintegration of economies played the key role in driving its decline" is an effective thesis sentence that "telegraphs," so that the reader expects the essay to have a section about cultural forces and another about the disintegration of economies. This thesis makes a definite, arguable claim: that the disintegration of economies played a more important role than cultural forces in defeating communism in Eastern Europe. The reader would react to this statement by thinking, "Perhaps what the author says is true, but I am not convinced. I want to read further to see how the author argues this claim."

A thesis should be as clear and specific as possible. Avoid overused, general terms and abstractions. For example, "Communism collapsed in Eastern Europe because of the ruling elite's inability to address the economic concerns of the people" is more powerful than "Communism collapsed due to societal discontent."

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How To Write a Thesis Statement

What is a Thesis Statement?

Almost all of us—even if we don't do it consciously—look early in an essay for a one- or two-sentence condensation of the argument or analysis that is to follow. We refer to that condensation as a thesis statement.

Why Should Your Essay Contain a Thesis Statement?

- to test your ideas by distilling them into a sentence or two
- to better organize and develop your argument
- to provide your reader with a “guide” to your argument

In general, your thesis statement will accomplish these goals if you think of the thesis as the answer to the question your paper explores.

How Can You Write a Good Thesis Statement?

Here are some helpful hints to get you started. You can either scroll down or select a link to a specific topic.

[How to Generate a Thesis Statement if the Topic is Assigned \(#assigned\)](#)

[How to Generate a Thesis Statement if the Topic is not Assigned \(#unassigned\)](#)

[How to Tell a Strong Thesis Statement from a Weak One \(#strongthesis\)](#)

How to Generate a Thesis Statement if the Topic is Assigned

Almost all assignments, no matter how complicated, can be reduced to a single question. Your first step, then, is to distill the assignment into a specific question. For example, if your assignment is, “Write a report to the local school board explaining the potential benefits of using computers in a fourth-grade class,” turn the request into a question like, “What are the potential benefits of using computers in a fourth-grade class?” After you've chosen the question your essay will answer, compose one or two complete sentences answering that question.

Q: “What are the potential benefits of using computers in a fourth-grade class?”

A: “The potential benefits of using computers in a fourth-grade class are . . .”

OR

A: “Using computers in a fourth-grade class promises to improve . . .”

The answer to the question is the thesis statement for the essay.

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How to Generate a Thesis Statement if the Topic is not Assigned

Even if your assignment doesn't ask a specific question, your thesis statement still needs to answer a question about the issue you'd like to explore. In this situation, your job is to figure out what question you'd like to write about.

A good thesis statement will usually include the following four attributes:

- take on a subject upon which reasonable people could disagree

- deal with a subject that can be adequately treated given the nature of the assignment
- express one main idea
- assert your conclusions about a subject

Let's see how to generate a thesis statement for a social policy paper.

Brainstorm the topic.

Let's say that your class focuses upon the problems posed by changes in the dietary habits of Americans. You find that you are interested in the amount of sugar Americans consume.

You start out with a thesis statement like this:

Sugar consumption.

This fragment isn't a thesis statement. Instead, it simply indicates a general subject. Furthermore, your reader doesn't know what you want to say about sugar consumption.

Narrow the topic.

Your readings about the topic, however, have led you to the conclusion that elementary school children are consuming far more sugar than is healthy.

You change your thesis to look like this:

Reducing sugar consumption by elementary school children.

This fragment not only announces your subject, but it focuses on one segment of the population: elementary school children. Furthermore, it raises a subject upon which reasonable people could disagree, because while most people might agree that children consume more sugar than they used to, not everyone would agree on what should be done or who should do it. You should note that this fragment is not a thesis statement because your reader doesn't know your conclusions on the topic.

Take a position on the topic.

After reflecting on the topic a little while longer, you decide that what you really want to say about this topic is that something should be done to reduce the amount of sugar these children consume.

You revise your thesis statement to look like this:

More attention should be paid to the food and beverage choices available to elementary school children.

This statement asserts your position, but the terms *more attention* and *food and beverage choices* are vague.

Use specific language.

You decide to explain what you mean about *food and beverage choices*, so you write:

Experts estimate that half of elementary school children consume nine times the recommended daily allowance of sugar.

This statement is specific, but it isn't a thesis. It merely reports a statistic instead of making an assertion.

Make an assertion based on clearly stated support.

You finally revise your thesis statement one more time to look like this:

Because half of all American elementary school children consume nine times the recommended daily allowance of sugar, schools should be required to replace the beverages in soda machines with

healthy alternatives.

Notice how the thesis answers the question, “What should be done to reduce sugar consumption by children, and who should do it?” When you started thinking about the paper, you may not have had a specific question in mind, but as you became more involved in the topic, your ideas became more specific. Your thesis changed to reflect your new insights.

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How to Tell a Strong Thesis Statement from a Weak One

1. A strong thesis statement takes some sort of stand.

Remember that your thesis needs to show your conclusions about a subject. For example, if you are writing a paper for a class on fitness, you might be asked to choose a popular weight-loss product to evaluate. Here are two thesis statements:

There are some negative and positive aspects to the Banana Herb Tea Supplement.

This is a weak thesis statement. First, it fails to take a stand. Second, the phrase *negative and positive aspects* is vague.

Because Banana Herb Tea Supplement promotes rapid weight loss that results in the loss of muscle and lean body mass, it poses a potential danger to customers.

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

2. A strong thesis statement justifies discussion.

Your thesis should indicate the point of the discussion. If your assignment is to write a paper on kinship systems, using your own family as an example, you might come up with either of these two thesis statements:

My family is an extended family.

This is a weak thesis because it merely states an observation. Your reader won't be able to tell the point of the statement, and will probably stop reading.

While most American families would view consanguineal marriage as a threat to the nuclear family structure, many Iranian families, like my own, believe that these marriages help reinforce kinship ties in an extended family.

This is a strong thesis because it shows how your experience contradicts a widely-accepted view. A good strategy for creating a strong thesis is to show that the topic is controversial. Readers will be interested in reading the rest of the essay to see how you support your point.

3. A strong thesis statement expresses one main idea.

Readers need to be able to see that your paper has one main point. If your thesis statement expresses more than one idea, then you might confuse your readers about the subject of your paper. For example:

Companies need to exploit the marketing potential of the Internet, and Web pages can provide both advertising and customer support.

This is a weak thesis statement because the reader can't decide whether the paper is about marketing on the Internet or Web pages. To revise the thesis, the relationship between the two ideas needs to become more clear. One way to revise the thesis would be to write:

Because the Internet is filled with tremendous marketing potential, companies should exploit this

potential by using Web pages that offer both advertising and customer support.

This is a strong thesis because it shows that the two ideas are related. Hint: a great many clear and engaging thesis statements contain words like *because*, *since*, *so*, *although*, *unless*, and *however*.

4. A strong thesis statement is specific.

A thesis statement should show exactly what your paper will be about, and will help you keep your paper to a manageable topic. For example, if you're writing a seven-to-ten page paper on hunger, you might say:

World hunger has many causes and effects.

This is a weak thesis statement for two major reasons. First, *world hunger* can't be discussed thoroughly in seven to ten pages. Second, *many causes and effects* is vague. You should be able to identify specific causes and effects. A revised thesis might look like this:

Hunger persists in Glandelinia because jobs are scarce and farming in the infertile soil is rarely profitable.

This is a strong thesis statement because it narrows the subject to a more specific and manageable topic, and it also identifies the specific causes for the existence of hunger.

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THESIS STATEMENTS

Every paper should have a clear thesis. The thesis is the center of your paper; every word, sentence, and paragraph in the paper should somehow support your thesis. The thesis statement is a concise sentence (or two) that expresses your main argument about the topic at hand. It is a statement that must be supported with argumentation and evidence before your reader will believe it. I will often use the words "thesis," "main argument," "interpretation," "theory," and "main assertion" as though they are interchangeable. Each term implies that the writer has taken a position on a topic, a position that must be carefully explained and supported with evidence (argued) before a reader will accept it. Remember, a thesis is not a "fact."

An important distinction needs to be made between a topic and a thesis. Think of the topic as your subject, or as the question you are trying to answer. For example, someone might ask you to compare the similarities and differences between two articles. This topic might be posed as a question: *How are Walker's and Le Guin's views of women's work similar?* Often, an inexperienced writer will rephrase this question and present it as though it is a thesis: *Walker's and Le Guin's views of women's work are similar in many ways.* This statement makes a claim, but not a strong one. Crucially, it fails to address the issue of how the authors' views are similar. Instead, we just get a restatement of the topic. This writer needs to make a more precise claim about the topic. For example: *Walker and Le Guin take a similar view of women's work in that both authors affirm the creativity imbedded in women's everyday tasks and blame a male-dominated cultural discourse for failing to give public recognition to that creativity.*

A second kind of confusion results when a writer picks an interesting topic but neglects to make an actual argument about it, deciding instead to treat the topic in a superficially "objective" manner. For example, one might decide to write a paper about custom car shows, a potentially good topic if the writer can make some argument about what these shows reveal about American political culture. If, however, the writer simply describes custom car shows, giving us lots of detail about where they are held and what one can find at them, the writer will fail the assignment because the paper will lack a thesis, a central argument with which one can engage in debate.

Characteristics of effective thesis statements:

1. Makes a claim that is supported by all other elements of the paper.
2. Contains key words that are echoed in the paper's topic sentences.
3. Implies (through its ordering of elements) the paper's organizational structure.
4. Written as a clear and precise sentence(s).
5. Appears in the introduction.

Examples of effective thesis statements:

1. *The racism which James Baldwin blames for sparking the 1943 Harlem riot is reflected in contemporary newspaper accounts of the riot, and especially in the commentary of white observers."*

This thesis for a research paper offers an unambiguous position which will be defended through the analysis of historical sources. Moreover, it provides an organizational clue by implying that the paper will examine newspaper accounts before it considers editorial commentary.

2. *In its peppy, flag-waving imagery, girls' gymnastics represents the American obsession with youth, beauty, and gender neutrality, transforming young adults into icons of success achieved not by birth right but self-created through hard work, dedication, and persistence."*

This thesis for a research paper is appropriately complex and challenging. It also \geq names \leq key points for analysis (youth, beauty, etc.) and suggests the order in which those points will be presented.

Characteristics of an Ineffective Thesis Statement:

1. The thesis seriously misrepresents or distorts the texts, ideas, or events it pretends to examine.
2. The thesis is too vague. It contains undefined terms or raises more questions than it answers. Such a thesis often just rewords the paper topic without proposing an answer to it.
3. The thesis simply states a fact.
4. The thesis makes several unrelated points. This happens if you get locked into the idea that your paper must contain three body paragraphs, each of which has been "previewed" in your introduction. This way of thinking can lead you to find three points to discuss before you have decided what you want to argue with your thesis; the result is that the only question your thesis statement answers is "What are the three paragraphs in my paper about?" Often those three paragraphs will not work together to support a single argument.
5. The thesis is obvious or unexceptional; it does not significantly add to the reader's understanding of the topic at hand. Such a thesis may just repeat an idea generated in class discussion without demonstrating any original thought on the writer's part.

The Difference Between an Opinion and a Thesis:

If each of you is to come up with an original thesis statement, how can we evaluate those theses? Doesn't a thesis reflect the writer's personal opinion, and isn't it therefore unfair to criticize it? No. Some confusion arises because many people offer opinions without any kind of supporting arguments and evidence. Such opinions are difficult to evaluate, and often don't invite critical engagement. In academic writing, however, you go beyond a simple statement of your opinion to make a carefully argued case for your thesis, and that thesis is only as effective as your defense of it.

Moreover, two theses are not always equal, even if each is supported. One thesis may offer an exceptionally challenging and insightful idea while the other may make a fairly obvious point.

This is not to say that raw opinions have no place in the writing process. In fact, articulating and examining your opinion about a particular text ("I hate this essay") can lead you to a topic and a thesis. I might, for example, start class discussion by asking for your opinion: "How do you like Bork's essay?" Answer: "I don't." Question: "Why not?" Answer: "Because it offends me." Question: "How does Bork do that?" As you unravel the reasons for your emotional response to Bork's essay, you will gather the raw material from which you can create a thesis-driven critique of his argument.