Thesis Statements

Inquire: What Do You Think About This?

Overview

If you have a strong opinion about a topic, it can be hard to coherently express your point of view. Sometimes, it can even be difficult to come up with a good argument to sway others to your position. In an essay, knowing what to say and how to say it can take a fair amount of planning and research. The first goal on the path to achieving a well-constructed essay is building a well-constructed thesis statement. With a strong, clearly stated thesis, your argument will have a solid foundation from which to expand.

Big Question: How do I clearly state my argument in an essay?

Watch: The Main Idea

Have you ever tried arguing with someone about a topic you were passionate about, but you couldn’t figure out how to present your side of the issue? At times it can be hard to think of what to say, or even what your opinion is on a topic. These same difficulties often occur when writing an essay. Where do you start? What exactly are you trying to say?

Coming up with and developing an essay can take a lot of hard work. It can involve re-reading a source over and over until you find that spark of an idea, or scouring through articles to find the support you need for your argument. And once you have an argument to make, knowing what to say and how to say it can take a fair amount of planning and research. There isn’t really a secret to writing a good essay, but there is one key element that is always needed if you are to produce an effective essay; you need a strong thesis statement.

You can think of a thesis statement as essentially a one sentence argument. It is the main idea of your essay. Anytime you’ve stated an opinion, you’ve made a thesis statement. Like opinions though, some thesis statements are more clearly understood than others. Think of a time you’ve struggled to understand what someone was trying to explain to you. How quickly did you lose interest, or begin to think that the person didn’t really understand what they were talking about? When crafting your thesis statement you need to remember that the strength of your thesis statement will have just as much to do with how well a reader understands what you are arguing as it does with how well supported your argument is.

This begs the question, how do you ensure that your reader understands what you are arguing? You start by knowing enough about your topic that you can explain it clearly to your audience. If you are confident in your knowledge of a subject, you will find it easier to create and support your argument.
It isn’t always easy to get people to agree and it can take a lot of work to get a person to listen to what you have to say. But once you have their attention, presenting an argument clearly and with the knowledge necessary to support it is the most important thing you can do to get them to consider your point of view. What are some topics you’ve wanted to discuss, but have wondered about how best to present them?

Read: What is My Argument?

Overview: The First Step

When you start writing an essay, your very first question should always be, “What is my argument?” The answer to that question provides the foundation for your thesis statement. The thesis statement is the core element of your essay. Everything you write in your essay will be driven by this sentence, so having a strong, focused thesis is the first step to building a strong essay.

The thesis statement should be either the last or second to last sentence in your introductory paragraph, but you should already have at least a good idea of what your thesis is before you even start writing. After reading your thesis statement, your reader should know exactly what you are arguing and how you will be arguing that point. Your reader should never have to guess at what your essay is about.

The Three Types of Thesis Statements

With regards to essays, there are three types of thesis statements that are used, depending on what you want your essay to do.

1. An argumentative thesis presents an opinion that is then defended with evidence presented throughout the rest of the essay.
2. An explanatory thesis explains an observation or theory in detail.
3. An analytical thesis takes an issue or argument from another source and breaks it down, discussing each point that makes up the issue or argument in detail, and then determines a position on that argument.

Each of these types of thesis is in its own way an argument and requires you to have a point of view that you will defend to your reader. The explanatory thesis can be the hardest to think about in these terms. Another way to frame this is to think of your explanation as the best way, in your opinion, to explain a topic.

Developing the Thesis Statement

Because your thesis statement is the core element of your essay, it is very important that you develop your thesis from a vague idea to a fully formed argument before you start writing. If you do not have a strong thesis, you risk your essay becoming an unsupported rant, or a meandering ramble.

A strong thesis statement will result from a close examination of a subject, and will have evidence to support the argument being made. To achieve a “close” examination of a subject, you should plan to spend time researching the topic and related issues. For instance, if you are writing an essay about the benefits of libraries in modern society, the first thing you will want to do is seek out various sources – articles or books about libraries and what benefits they provide to communities – and then read these sources, looking for evidence that supports your planned thesis. Be sure to look for at least three different sources to support your argument; a rich variety of sources can show your reader that there is a wide
base of evidence consistent with your thesis. Also, read your sources carefully. An article that appears to support your argument may actually come to a different conclusion than you initially thought.

A “Debatable” Statement

As has been discussed, a thesis statement is meant to be an opinion that can be supported by evidence in the course of your essay. With this in mind, it’s important to remember that simply stating a fact and then supporting it is not what a thesis is meant to do. A thesis should be an original thought – something you’ve discovered through your own examination of a subject – which is “debatable,” or able to be argued against. This is why it is important to find the strongest evidence to support your thesis. It can also be helpful to consider ways that another writer might try to argue against your thesis. Anticipating contrary points of view will help you think of sub-topics to address throughout your essay.

Phrasing your Thesis

Once you have amassed support for your idea, you can begin to think about how to phrase your thesis. Since your thesis statement will come at the end of your introductory paragraph, you don’t need to worry about giving context for your argument within your thesis statement. In other words, don’t over explain what you are arguing. Focus on communicating the most important details central to what your essay is about. If you find yourself having to use a great deal of detail in your thesis statement, your argument may be too unfocused or too overly specific, and you may want to re-think your idea. There may be details you provide in your thesis statement, such as background information, that would better service your paper as part of the introductory paragraph that leads to your thesis. Alternately, you may launch into an analysis or present a sub-topic that would be better explored as a supporting argument in the body paragraphs of your essay. Just remember, the thesis statement is what you are arguing. Everything else in the essay is there to support that statement.

Another important element to pay attention to when phrasing your thesis is the language you are using. Your thesis needs to be clearly stated and should be understandable to your reader. Language that is overly specialized or complex should be kept to a minimum. The amount of specialized language, or jargon, may vary depending on who your reader is, so be aware of who you are writing this essay for. If you are writing for a general audience, then using simple, direct language that avoids jargon is most likely best. If your essay is meant for an audience consisting of your peers or people who are already knowledgeable about the subject of your essay, using more specialized language may be fine, or even necessary, to explain your argument. Don’t overload your thesis with specialized terms to make it sound more important or impressive. Again, the main focus of the thesis is to inform your reader about what you are arguing. If you feel like a term needs to be defined in order to effectively state your thesis, you can define it as part of your introductory paragraph, or, depending on the essay format you are using, you can add it as a footnote.

Reflect: The Basic Idea

Poll

Every thesis is drawn from a basic idea, usually as a response to something that you have encountered. What are some ways you’ve come up with well-formed opinions?

- liking or disliking something you’ve read
- agreeing or disagreeing with an idea someone has discussed with you
- witnessing an event that made you think about an issue
Expand: Revising your Thesis

Overview: What if My Thesis Isn’t Working?

As you write your essay, you may discover that your thesis doesn’t line-up with what you are ultimately talking about throughout the rest of your paper. Maybe the wording in your thesis needs to be made more clear. Perhaps your opinion has shifted, or the sources you are using don’t actually support your thesis, but instead, support a different point, or even contradict your thesis altogether. Don’t panic! Ideas evolve as you explore them, and often, it is better to follow the thread by revising your thesis statement than to try to force your essay to align with your thesis.

Re-wording your Thesis

Sometimes as you write the other parts of your essay, you may look back at your thesis and find that it doesn’t seem to state your point as clearly as it should. If an idea seems vague or comes off as overly-complicated, try rewriting your thesis statement. A good way to think this through is to start by writing your basic argument as simplistically as possible. Ask yourself, “What does the reader absolutely need to know about my argument?” and write your thesis statement to answer only that question. Then add to that sentence only words that will help it work in the context of your introductory paragraph. If you need to add specialized terms to your sentence, try to keep them to a minimum. Again, your goal is to make your thesis statement as clear and focused as possible, so bear that in mind when choosing your words.

Re-evaluating your Argument

What if you’ve realized your essay has morphed into a different idea altogether, or your thesis is contradicted by the sources you are using? You may need to re-evaluate your argument and possibly change your thesis to something that is more consistent with the way you have crafted your argument. Read through your essay carefully, just as you would one of your sources, and consider the points you are making. Then, keeping these points in mind, think of an opinion or argument you have about these points. From there, develop a new thesis statement just as you did when you started the essay. If you’ve found that your sources contradict your thesis, you can rewrite the thesis statement to argue against your original position.

It's important to remember that re-evaluating your thesis may require some more intensive revision in other areas of your essay to make the body paragraphs line-up with your new thesis. However, before you start on that, make sure you have revised your thesis into an argument that is well-supported by the sources you are using in your essay.

Lesson Toolbox

Additional Resources and Readings

Features a lot of good tips for writing a thesis statement, including some grammatical tips

- Source: The Center for Writing Studies, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign
An excellent breakdown of thesis statements with several useful examples

- Source: The Writing Center, University of Carolina at Chapel Hill

Gives good examples of the three types of thesis statements

- https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/545/01/
- Source: The Online Writing Lab, Purdue University

Lesson Glossary

**thesis statement**: a sentence that defines an argument

**essay**: a structured written argument that uses multiple sub-points to support the main argument

**phrase**: the way in which a sentence is written, such as word choice and placement

**revise**: editing a piece of writing to improve the substance of what is written

**body paragraph**: paragraphs that follow the introductory paragraph and provide supporting arguments for a thesis statement

Check Your Knowledge

1. When phrasing a thesis statement, you should always consider your audience.
   - A. True
   - B. False

2. After you’ve written your essay, you may have to go back and revise your thesis.
   - A. True
   - B. False

3. A well-phrased thesis should be complex and full of specialized language.
   - A. True
   - B. False

Answer Key:

Citations

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