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 the main idea or thesis of an essay?

Watch: The Main Idea
A good essay begins with a clear, sufficiently narrow subject and a strong thesis statement. This thesis statement expresses your main idea and lets the reader know your conclusions about the idea.

A good thesis statement will:
- be narrow enough to be addressed adequately in a short essay
- focus on a single main idea
- use specific language
- state clearly both what the idea is (the "what") as well as your conclusions about it (the "why").

You want to talk about sugar consumption in the United States. You realize your initial subject is too broad, so you narrow it to focus on sugar consumption by elementary school children.

Elementary school children consume too much sugar.

This is a good start, but you realize that you are simply making a broad claim. There is no conclusion or call to action associated with your statement. With that in mind, you revise it to have a clearer purpose.

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

This is better, but it still seems too general. Your next step is to revise the statement to include more specific language. You decide to get rid of vague terms like "more attention" and "food and beverage choices," and to replace them more direct and specific information.
Experts estimate that half of elementary school children consume nine times the recommended daily allowance of sugar.

You feel good about these changes and are convinced that you have stated clearly what your idea is (the "what"). You notice, however, that you still haven't made a conclusion of assertion about your idea (the "why"). So far, you are merely reporting a statistic.

With that in mind, you go back to your statement and make a final revision.

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.

When you think you have a good thesis statement, here are some questions to ask yourself.

1. Is my thesis statement narrow enough to be addressed adequately in a short essay?
2. Does my thesis statement focus on a single idea?
3. Does my thesis statement contain both a "what" and a "why"?
4. Is my thesis clear and easily understood?
5. Does my thesis statement provide a strong and rational foundation for my essay?

Read: What is Thesis or My Main Idea?

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 what your main idea is (the "what") and what conclusions you are making about that idea (the "why"). Your reader should never have to guess at what your essay is about.

Thesis Basics: The "What" and the “Why”

A good thesis statement will generally have the following attributes:

- It will be narrow enough to be addressed adequately in a short essay
- It will focus on a single main idea
- It will use specific language
- It will state clearly both what the idea is (the "what") as well as your conclusions about it (the "why").

You will generally begin your planning for any paper with a general subject. Narrow that subject into a limited topic, and then, through research, come up with an even more specific focus.

General Subject --> Limited Topic --> Specific Focus
As you work on your thesis, you will begin with your limited topic, add a specific claim or focus related to the topic, and then formulate a final thesis statement.

**Limited Topic + Specific Claim or Focus = Effective Thesis Statement**

For example, you might decide to argue that government control of interference with industry has negative consequences. That's a good general foundation for an idea, but it lacks specificity and a clear conclusion about the idea (the “why”). You might revise your idea into a strong thesis statement by narrowing your focus and making a specific assertion.

Industry in Argentina became more inefficient in the 1940s and 1950s as the government took control of major transportation and communication services.

This thesis statement:

-Is narrow and specific enough to be addressed in a short essay. You have narrowed your idea to a specific time period in a single country.
-Focuses on a single idea. You are writing about the negative consequences of government control of industry in Argentina.
-Uses specific language. You are writing about a specific country, Argentina, and government control of clearly identified services.
-Contains both clear “what” and “why” components. You stated a clear idea (“what”) — that "industry in Argentina became more inefficient in the 1940s and 1950s" — and made a clear conclusion or assertion about the idea (“why”). You told your reader that industry became more efficient because the government assumed control of certain public services.

**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.

Common Thesis Pitfalls and Strategies for Revision

There are a number of common mistakes people make when writing thesis statements.

1. Making statements that are too broad. Here is an example of a thesis statement that is too broad.

   Drug use is detrimental to society.

   To make this statement more effective, we need to be more specific about what we mean by "drug use," and narrow our definition of "detrimental to society." With that in mind, we might revise the statement to read:

   Illegal drug use is detrimental because it encourages gang violence.

   This improved version of the thesis statement narrows "drug use" to "illegal drugs" and narrows "detrimental to society" to the specific topic of gang violence.

2. Avoid merely reporting a fact. It is important that your thesis do more than state what is already proven fact. For your idea to have any kind of impact, it must go beyond what everyone already knows to be true.

   Here is an example of a thesis statement that simply reports a common fact.

   Hoover's administration was rocked by scandal.
We can revise this thesis to be more effective by adding insight and including a clear assertion about the idea (the "why").

*The many scandals of Hoover’s administration revealed basic problems with the Republican Party's nominating process.*

3. Avoid making universal judgments that oversimplify complex issues. Such judgements are generally too broad and make blanket assumptions that are rarely held by everyone.

Here is an example of a thesis statement that makes a universal judgement assertion.

*We must save the whales.*

We can improve this statement in a number of ways. First, we can make it clear that we understand not everyone already accepts this as obvious. Instead of "must" we might use "should." In addition, we can provide a strong "why" or assertion to support our idea that whales should be saved. With this in mind, we might revise our original statement as follows.

*Because our planet's health may depend upon biological diversity, we should save the whales.*

As you work to revise your thesis statements, here are five important questions to ask yourself:

1. Is my thesis statement narrow enough to be addressed adequately in a short essay?
2. Does my thesis statement focus on a single idea?
3. Does my thesis statement contain both a "what" and a "why"?
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**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/](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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