Thesis Statements

A thesis statement is:

- The statement of the author’s position on a topic or subject.
- Clear, concise, and goes beyond fact or observation to become an idea that needs to be supported (arguable).
- Often a statement of tension, where the author refutes or complicates an existing assumption or claim (counterargument).
- Often answers WHY or HOW questions related to the topic at hand.

A thesis statement is NOT:

- A statement of fact or observation (no matter how astute the observation).
- A statement of personal conviction or opinion.
- A generalization or overly broad claim.

For the writer, the thesis statement:

- Helps the writer determine the essay’s real focus. What are you trying to say with the evidence presented? A thesis provides a theory to be tested by evidence.
- Serves as a planning tool. The component parts of the thesis often correspond with the essay’s topic sentences.

For the reader, the thesis statement:

- Serves as a “map” to guide the reader through the paper. In the same way the thesis helps you organize your paper, the thesis helps organize the reader’s thinking. Once a solid thesis is presented, the reader will understand that all of the evidence presented is in service of proving the thesis.
- Creates a reason to keep reading. The reader will want to discover the support behind the thesis.

If you are having trouble writing a thesis…

…ask yourself a genuine, difficult question about the topic (usually a “how” or “why” question), and state your response, even if you are not sure why you want to give that answer. Your response may very well be a workable thesis, and the pursuit of proving that answer may reveal to you more about your sources of evidence.

…think of a strong statement or observation you have made about the subject beginning with the words “In this essay, I will…” Then ask yourself why this observation is important, or “So What?” ¹ Answer the question with “I believe this is because…” In the draft stage you might phrase a working thesis as the following:

In this essay, I plan to explain how Mark Twain’s Adventures of Huckleberry Finn contrasts his river and shore scenes. I believe Twain is telling us that in order to find America’s true democratic ideals one must leave “civilized” society (the shore) and go back to nature (the river).

¹ This strategy comes from Writing Analytically by Jill Stephen and David Rosenwasser.
Then revise out the “I” statements. A revised version of this thesis might look like this:

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

**Writing in the Disciplines**

Keep in mind that thesis statements vary depending on the purpose of the assignment (or type of essay), and also by discipline. Here are a few notes on the thesis statements and the purpose of writing in a few different disciplines.²

**English:** “A thesis is an interpretive argument about a text or an aspect of a text. An interpretive argument is defined as one that makes a reasonable but contestable claim about a text; in other words, it is an opinion about a text that can be supported with textual evidence.”

**Sciences (Biology):** “A well-written scientific paper explains the scientist’s motivation for doing an experiment, the experimental design and execution, and the meaning of the results... The last sentences of the introduction should be a statement of objectives and a statement of hypotheses.”

**Business:** “When you write in business courses, you will usually write for a specific audience. Your goal will be to communicate in a straight-forward manner and with a clear purpose.”³

**History:** “In historical writing, a thesis explains the words or deeds of people in the past. It shows cause and effect; it answers the question why?... A thesis must change a reader’s mind to be of value. If it presents only facts or an obvious finding, it will merely confirm what the reader already believes.”

_Last updated 6/4/2014_

² The following statements on writing in the disciplines have been borrowed from the Writing Guides found at the Writing Across the Curriculum website at http://wac.gmu.edu/guides/GMU%20guides.html.