
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 Adventure’s 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.”

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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>.

3 From *A Writer’s Reference, 6th Edition, with Writing in the Disciplines*, by Diana Hacker.