

# The Center for Writing Studies

## University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

# Writers Workshop: Writer Resources

## Writing Tips: Thesis Statements

### Defining the Thesis Statement

#### What is a thesis statement?

Every paper you write should have a main point, a main idea, or central message. The argument(s) you make in your paper should reflect this main idea. The sentence that captures your position on this main idea is what we call a thesis statement.

#### How long does it need to be?

A thesis statement focuses your ideas into one or two sentences. It should present the topic of your paper and also make a comment about your position in relation to the topic. Your thesis statement should tell your reader what the paper is about and also help guide your writing and keep your argument focused.

### Questions to Ask When Formulating Your Thesis

#### Where is your thesis statement?

You should provide a thesis early in your essay -- in the introduction, or in longer essays in the second paragraph -- in order to establish your position and give your reader a sense of direction.

**Tip:** In order to write a successful thesis statement:

- Avoid burying a great thesis statement in the middle of a paragraph or late in the paper.
- Be as clear and as specific as possible; avoid vague words.
- Indicate the point of your paper but avoid sentence structures like, "The point of my paper is..."

#### Is your thesis statement specific?

Your thesis statement should be as clear and specific as possible. Normally you will continue to refine your thesis as you revise your argument(s), so your thesis will evolve and gain definition as you obtain a better sense of where your argument is taking you.

**Tip:** Check your thesis:

- Are there two large statements connected loosely by a coordinating conjunction (i.e. "and," "but," "or," "for," "nor," "so," "yet")?
- Would a subordinating conjunction help (i.e. "through," "although," "because," "since") to signal a relationship between the two sentences?
- Or do the two statements imply a fuzzy unfocused thesis?
- If so, settle on one single focus and then proceed with further development.

#### Is your thesis statement too general?

Your thesis should be limited to what can be accomplished in the specified number of pages. Shape your topic so that you can get straight to the "meat" of it. Being specific in your paper will be much more successful than writing about general things that do not say much. Don't settle for three pages of just skimming the surface.

The opposite of a focused, narrow, crisp thesis is a broad, sprawling, superficial thesis. Compare this original thesis (too general) with three possible revisions (more focused, each presenting a different approach to the same topic):

- **Original thesis:**

There are serious objections to today's horror movies.

- **Revised theses:**

Because modern cinematic techniques have allowed filmmakers to get more graphic, horror flicks have desensitized young American viewers to violence.

The pornographic violence in "bloodbath" slasher movies degrades both men and women.

Today's slasher movies fail to deliver the emotional catharsis that 1930s horror films did.

### **Is your thesis statement clear?**

Your thesis statement is no exception to your writing: it needs to be as clear as possible. By being as clear as possible in your thesis statement, you will make sure that your reader understands exactly what you mean.

**Tip:** In order to be as clear as possible in your writing:

- Unless you're writing a technical report, avoid technical language. Always avoid jargon, unless you are confident your audience will be familiar with it.
- Avoid vague words such as "interesting," "negative," "exciting," "unusual," and "difficult."
- Avoid abstract words such as "society," "values," or "culture."

These words tell the reader next to nothing if you do not carefully explain what you mean by them. Never assume that the meaning of a sentence is obvious. Check to see if you need to define your terms ("socialism," "conventional," "commercialism," "society"), and then decide on the most appropriate place to do so. Do not assume, for example, that you have the same understanding of what "society" means as your reader. To avoid misunderstandings, be as specific as possible.

Compare the original thesis (not specific and clear enough) with the revised version (much more specific and clear):

**Original thesis:** Although the timber wolf is a timid and gentle animal, it is being systematically exterminated. [if it's so timid and gentle -- why is it being exterminated?]

**Revised thesis:** Although the timber wolf is actually a timid and gentle animal, it is being systematically exterminated because people wrongfully believe it to be a fierce and cold-blooded killer.

### **Does your thesis include a comment about your position on the issue at hand?**

The thesis statement should do more than merely announce the topic; it must reveal what position you will take in relation to that topic, how you plan to analyze/evaluate the subject or the issue. In short, instead of merely stating a general fact or resorting to a simplistic pro/con statement, you must decide what it is you have to say.

**Tips:**

- Avoid merely announcing the topic; your original and specific "angle" should be clear. In this way you will tell your reader why your take on the issue matters.

**Original thesis:** In this paper, I will discuss the relationship between fairy tales and early childhood.

**Revised thesis:** Not just empty stories for kids, fairy tales shed light on the psychology of young children.

- Avoid making universal or pro/con judgments that oversimplify complex issues.

**Original thesis:** We must save the whales.

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

- When you make a (subjective) judgment call, specify and justify your reasoning. "Just because" is not a good reason for an argument.

**Original thesis:** Socialism is the best form of government for Kenya.

**Revised thesis:** If the government takes over industry in Kenya, the industry will become more efficient.

- Avoid merely reporting a fact. Say more than what is already proven fact. Go further with your ideas. Otherwise... why would your point matter?

**Original thesis:** Hoover's administration was rocked by scandal.

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

Do not expect to come up with a fully formulated thesis statement before you have finished writing the paper. The thesis will inevitably change as you revise and develop your ideas—and that is ok! Start with a tentative thesis and revise as your paper develops.

### Is your thesis statement original?

Avoid, avoid, avoid generic arguments and formula statements. They work well to get a rough draft started, but will easily bore a reader. Keep revising until the thesis reflects your real ideas.

**Tip:** The point you make in the paper should matter:

- Be prepared to answer "So what?" about your thesis statement.
- Be prepared to explain why the point you are making is worthy of a paper. Why should the reader read it?

Compare the following:

- **Original thesis:**

There are advantages and disadvantages to using statistics. (a fill-in-the-blank formula)

- **Revised theses:**

Careful manipulation of data allows a researcher to use statistics to support any claim she desires.

In order to ensure accurate reporting, journalists must understand the real significance of the statistics they report.

Because advertisers consciously and unconsciously manipulate data, every consumer should learn how to evaluate statistical claims.

Avoid formula and generic words. Search for concrete subjects and active verbs, revising as many "to be" verbs as possible. A few suggestions below show how specific word choice sharpens and clarifies your meaning.

**Original:** "Society is..." [who is this "society" and what exactly is it doing?]

**Revised:** "Men and women will learn how to...", "writers can generate...", "television addicts may chip away at...", "American educators must decide...", "taxpayers and legislators alike can help fix..."

**Original:** "the media"

**Revised:** "the new breed of television reporters," "advertisers," "hard-hitting print journalists," "horror flicks," "TV movies of the week," "sitcoms," "national public radio," "Top 40 bop-til-you-drop..."

**Original:** "is, are, was, to be" or "to do, to make"

**Revised:** any great action verb you can concoct: "to generate," "to demolish," "to batter," "to revolt," "to discover," "to flip," "to signify," "to endure..."

Use your own words in thesis statements; avoid quoting. Crafting an original, insightful, and memorable thesis makes a distinct impression on a reader. You will lose credibility as a writer if you become only a mouthpiece or a copyist; you will gain credibility by grabbing the reader with your own ideas and words.

A well-crafted thesis statement reflects well-crafted ideas. It signals a writer who has intelligence, commitment, and enthusiasm.

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