

Thesis Statements

Adapted from http://www.dartmouth.edu/~writing/resources/students/ac_paper/develop.html

Why Is a Thesis Statement So Important?

Good question. As we've stated in class, our goal as writers is to give information to our readers that is interesting and easily understood. The thesis statement is typically that one sentence that **asserts** the main point, and **controls and structures** the essay. Without a strong, thoughtful thesis, your paper might seem unfocused, weak, and not worth the reader's time.

How Do I Write a Good Thesis Statement?

A good thesis statement will have the following characteristics:

1. *A good thesis statement will make a claim.* You need to develop an interesting perspective on a topic that you can support and defend. This perspective must be more than an observation. "America is violent" is an observation. "Americans are violent because they are fearful" posits an interesting perspective on violence in America. It gives a possible reason WHY America is violent—a reason that can be supported and defended with specific examples. **You want to make sure that your claim is not too broad, and that you can successfully defend and support it in the required number of pages.** "Disease has shaped human history" is an impossibly large thesis. It would be better narrowed down to a specific disease, a specific time period, and a specific way (or ways) that disease has shaped human history. "In the mid-1980s, AIDS changed people's attitudes about dating."
2. *A good thesis statement will inspire (rather than quiet) other points of view on a topic.* One might argue that America is violent because of its violent entertainment industry. Or because of the proliferation of guns. Or because of the disintegration of the family. No reasonable person would argue that violence in America is bad. If your thesis is positing something that no one can, or would want to argue with, then it's not a very good thesis. Likewise, **avoid thesis statements that are narrow dead-ends.** "The speed-limit outside my house is 65 miles per hour." As a writer, there is nowhere to go with this. A better thesis statement would be "The speed limit near my home should be lowered to fifty-five miles per hour for several reasons."
3. *A good thesis will control the entire paper.* Your thesis sentence determines what you are required to say in a paper, and it also determines what you cannot say. Every paragraph in your paper exists in order to support your thesis. Accordingly, if one of your paragraphs seems irrelevant to your thesis you have two choices: get rid of the paragraph, or rewrite your thesis. There is no third option! **Think of your thesis statements as a contract between you and your reader.** If you introduce ideas that the reader isn't prepared for, or if you don't develop the ideas presented in your thesis, you've violated the contract.

4. *A good thesis will provide structure for your paper.* A good thesis not only signals to the reader what your main point is, but how you are going to develop that main point. This can be signaled directly: “American fearfulness expresses itself in three curious ways: A, B, and C.” This tells your reader you have three main points, and that they are going to be discussed in your paper in this order. However, this kind of thesis statement may be too formulaic or too constricting for all papers. You could instead say, “Americans are fearful, and this fearfulness manifests itself in the form of violence.” The reader knows that you will then show examples of American fearfulness, and will tell how that fearfulness turns into violence. Again, your thesis statement is a **contract**. If you suggest a structure or a particular ordering principle and then abandon it, the reader will feel betrayed, irritated and confused.

The Thesis Statement Checklist

- **Does my thesis sentence attempt to answer (or at least explore) a challenging intellectual question?**
- **Does the thesis statement address the topic given to you? Will it allow you to fully explore and discuss all aspects of the essay prompt?**
- **Is the point I’m making one that would generate discussion, or is it one that would leave people asking, “So what?”**
- **Is my thesis too narrow? Is it a “dead-end” statement?**
- **Is my thesis too vague? Too general? Too broad? Should I focus on some more specific aspect of my topic?**
- **Does my thesis indicate a direction and structure for my paper?**
- **Is the language in my thesis vivid and clear? Is it formulaic, or is it engaging and interesting?**