



Thesis Statement

What is a Thesis Statement?

A thesis statement is an **argument that clearly states the point of view of the author, and outlines how the author intends to support his or her argument.**

The thesis statement is usually the last sentence of the first paragraph, and it is usually a **single sentence** in this paragraph that presents your argument. The body of the paper then gathers and organizes evidence that supports the thesis statement. The thesis statement is the roadmap of the paper.

Another way to describe a thesis statement is to say that it acts like a topic sentence for an entire essay. Just as the topic sentence tells readers what will be discussed in a particular paragraph, the thesis statement alerts readers as to what to expect from the rest of the essay.

What is a Thesis Statement Not?

A thesis is not a **topic**; nor is it a **fact**; nor is it an **opinion**.

"Reasons for the fall of communism" is a topic. "Communism collapsed in Eastern Europe" is a fact known by educated people. "The fall of communism is the best thing that ever happened in Europe" is an opinion. (Superlatives like "the best" almost always lead to trouble. It's impossible to weigh every "thing" that ever happened in Europe. And what about the fall of Hitler? Couldn't that be "the best thing"?)

Strong Thesis Statement

- A strong thesis statement is one which is specific and one which takes a stand.
- A strong thesis statement is arguable and justifies discussion.
- A strong thesis statement does not express many ideas, but sticks to one particular theory or idea.
- A strong thesis statement will have ample evidence to support it.
- A strong thesis statement needs to be clear and concise.

How to Tell a Strong Thesis Statement from a Weak One

A strong thesis statement is specific

A thesis statement should show exactly what your paper will be about, and will help you keep your paper to a manageable topic. For example, if you're writing a paper on hunger, you might say:

World hunger has many causes and effects.

This is a weak thesis statement for two major reasons. First, *world hunger* can't be discussed thoroughly in five to six pages. Second, *many causes and effects* is vague. You should be able to identify specific causes and effects. A revised thesis might look like this:

Hunger persists in Glandelinia because jobs are scarce and farming in the infertile soil is rarely profitable.

This is a strong thesis statement because it narrows the subject to a more specific and manageable topic, and it also identifies the specific causes for the existence of hunger.

A strong thesis statement takes some sort of stand

Remember that your thesis needs to show your conclusions about a subject. For example, if you are writing a paper for a class on fitness, you might be asked to choose a popular weight-loss product to evaluate. Here are two thesis statements:

There are some negative and positive aspects to the Banana Herb Tea Supplement.

This is a weak thesis statement. First, it fails to take a stand. Second, the phrase *negative and positive aspects* is vague.

Because Banana Herb Tea Supplement promotes rapid weight loss that results in the loss of muscle and lean body mass, it poses a potential danger to customers.

This is a strong thesis because it takes a stand, and because it's specific

A strong thesis statement justifies discussion

Your thesis should indicate the point of the discussion. If your assignment is to write a paper on kinship systems, using your own family as an example, you might come up with either of these two thesis statements:

My family is an extended family.

This is a weak thesis because it merely states an observation. Your reader won't be able to tell the point of the statement, and will probably stop reading.

While most American families would view consanguineal marriage as a threat to the nuclear family structure, many Iranian families, like my own, believe that these marriages help reinforce kinship ties in an extended family.

This is a strong thesis because it shows how your experience contradicts a widely-accepted view. A good strategy for creating a strong thesis is to show that the topic is controversial. Readers will be interested in reading the rest of the essay to see how you support your point.

A strong thesis statement expresses one main idea

Readers need to be able to see that your paper has one main point. If your thesis statement expresses more than one idea, then you might confuse your readers about the subject of your paper. For example:

Companies need to exploit the marketing potential of the Internet, and Web pages can provide both advertising and customer support.

This is a weak thesis statement because the reader can't decide whether the paper is about marketing on the Internet or Web pages. To revise the thesis, the relationship

between the two ideas needs to become clearer. One way to revise the thesis would be to write:

Because the Internet is filled with tremendous marketing potential, companies should exploit this potential by using Web pages that offer both advertising and customer support.

This is a strong thesis because it shows that the two ideas are related. Hint: a great many clear and engaging thesis statements contain words like *because*, *since*, *so*, *although*, *unless*, and *however*.

Steps in Constructing a Thesis

First, analyze your primary sources

Look for tension, interest, ambiguity, controversy, and/or complication. Does the author contradict himself or herself? Is a point made and later reversed? What are the deeper implications of the author's argument? Figuring out the **why** to one or more of these questions, or to related questions, will put you on the path to developing a working thesis. (Without the why, you probably have only come up with an observation—that there are, for instance, many different metaphors in such-and-such a poem—which is not a thesis.)

Once you have a working thesis, write it down

There is nothing as frustrating as hitting on a great idea for a thesis, then forgetting it when you lose concentration. And by writing down your thesis you will be forced to think of it clearly, logically, and concisely. You probably will not be able to write out a final-draft version of your thesis the first time you try, but you'll get yourself on the right track by writing down what you have.

Keep your thesis prominent in your introduction

A good, standard place for your thesis statement is at the end of an introductory paragraph, especially in shorter 5-6 page essays. Readers are used to finding theses there, so they automatically pay more attention when they read the last sentence of your introduction. Although this is not required in all academic essays, it is a good rule of thumb.

Anticipate the counter-arguments

Once you have a working thesis, you should think about what might be said against it. This will help you to refine your thesis, and it will also make you think of the arguments that you'll need to refute later on in your essay. (Every argument has a counter-argument. If yours doesn't, then it's not an argument—it may be a fact, or an opinion, but it is not an argument.)

Michael Dukakis lost the 1988 presidential election because he failed to campaign vigorously after the Democratic National Convention.

This statement is on its way to being a thesis. However, it is too easy to imagine possible counter-arguments. For example, a political observer might believe that Dukakis lost because he suffered from a "soft-on-crime" image. If you complicate your thesis by anticipating the counter-argument, you'll strengthen your argument, as shown in the sentence below.

While Dukakis' "soft-on-crime" image hurt his chances in the 1988 election, his failure to campaign vigorously after the Democratic National Convention bore a greater responsibility for his defeat.

Some Caveats and Some Examples

A thesis is never a question

Readers of academic essays expect to have questions discussed, explored, or even answered. A question ("Why did communism collapse in Eastern Europe?") is not an argument, and without an argument, a thesis is dead in the water.

A thesis is never a list

"For political, economic, social and cultural reasons, communism collapsed in Eastern Europe" does a good job of telling the reader what to expect in the essay—a section about political reasons, a section about economic reasons, a section about social reasons, and a section about cultural reasons. However, political, economic, social and cultural reasons are pretty much the only possible reasons why communism could collapse. This sentence lacks tension and doesn't advance an argument. Everyone knows that politics, economics, and culture are important.

A thesis should never be vague, combative or confrontational

An ineffective thesis would be, "Communism collapsed in Eastern Europe because communism is evil." This is hard to argue (evil from whose perspective? what does evil mean?) and it is likely to mark you as moralistic and judgmental rather than rational and thorough. It also may spark a defensive reaction from readers sympathetic to communism. If readers strongly disagree with you right off the bat, they may stop reading.

An effective thesis has a definable, arguable claim

"While cultural forces contributed to the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe, the disintegration of economies played the key role in driving its decline" is an effective thesis sentence that "telegraphs," so that the reader expects the essay to have a section about cultural forces and another about the disintegration of economies. This thesis makes a definite, arguable claim: that the disintegration of economies played a more important role than cultural forces in defeating communism in Eastern Europe. The reader would react to this statement by thinking, "Perhaps what the author says is true, but I am not convinced. I want to read further to see how the author argues this claim."

A thesis should be as clear and specific as possible

Avoid overused, general terms and abstractions. For example, "Communism collapsed in Eastern Europe because of the ruling elite's inability to address the economic concerns of the people" is more powerful than "Communism collapsed due to societal discontent."

A thesis should answer the how and why questions

A thesis is usually more effective and will lead to a better essay if it answers *how* or *why* questions, not *who*, *what*, *when*, or *where* questions, or at least if the answers to the *who*, *what*, *when*, or *where* question require exploring *how* or *why* questions.

A thesis never provides its own support

The thesis is the statement that the rest of the essay supports; a thesis never provides its own support. It makes no sense to say a thesis is poor because it is unsupported or lacks evidence; the support or evidence comes elsewhere. A thesis that supported itself would be self-evident — a fact — and could not then have served as the basis for an essay. Of course, an essay may be poor because the author never supports the thesis persuasively, but that is the problem of the essay as a whole, not the thesis itself.

A thesis should not be stated in terms of absolutes

Beware of absolutes. The problem with a thesis such as "George Marshall was the greatest Secretary of State in U.S. history" is that you would have to compare him to all the others, or at least all those who are generally admired. This is possible to do, but probably not in an essay assigned to an undergraduate course, which would not be long enough to accomplish that task. The same applies to a thesis such as "King Lear is Shakespeare's most tragic character." On the other hand, one can argue an absolute if one sufficiently limits the context: "Of the four most renowned silent film comedians, Buster Keaton was the most innovative film-maker" is an acceptable thesis because one might reasonably compare four film-makers in a college essay.

A thesis should not be stated in the first person

Never use the first person in your thesis. Your name is on the essay, so we know who is making the argument. Thus, a thesis that begins with something like "I would argue that" merely wastes time. Besides, you want to make your thesis as strong and convincing as possible; phrasing it as a matter of personal opinion weakens it.

A thesis should not be stated in the passive voice

While sometimes useful, the passive voice is generally weaker and sounds less confident than an active voice sentence.

Never attribute your thesis to someone else, or to general opinion

A thesis that says "Many people believe" or that some famous scholar or critic believes something is necessarily about "many people" or the famous scholar or critic, not about the point being made, or more importantly the point *you* are trying to make.