

Developing a thesis statement

What is a thesis statement? A thesis statement is a sentence that establishes the argument in your paper.

What is not a thesis statement? A question is not a thesis and neither is a general statement without support. A topic for your paper is important, but a topic is also not the thesis as it usually does not contain an argument.

Thesis 101

1. **Stick to the prompt.** Identify what *kind* of paper your professor is asking you to write. This could be a text-based argument, a lab report, or anything in between.
2. **Brainstorm.** Brainstorm some ideas that interest you within the bounds of your professor's prompt.
 - a. *Taking notes.* Write ideas down on a piece of paper and circle keywords to form a topic for your paper. This is a good time to refer back to class notes.
 - b. *Class discussion.* Any ideas or keywords your professor repeated are a good place to start forming ideas for your paper.
 - c. *Creating relationships.* Organize sources and look for relationships between sources. Ask yourself, "What is the significance of this relationship?"
3. **Draft a thesis.** Try asking yourself the question, "Now that I know what I am writing about, what do I have to say about this?" Or, if your professor asks you to answer a question, ask yourself, "How would I answer this question with the class text(s) in mind?"
4. **Consider your audience.** Customize your thesis for a specific audience. This could be your classmates or an audience entirely unfamiliar with the topic you will discuss.
5. **Make your thesis arguable.** To know if your thesis is arguable, see if you can come up with a counter-argument to your thesis.
 - a. *Unarguable example:* "Labs are the best choice of family dog." This is unarguable because it is a declarative statement without any *support* to argue about.
 - b. *Arguable example:* "Labs are the best choice of family dog because they are playful." This thesis is arguable because support is provided for the author's claim.
 - c. *Counter-argument example:* "[author] believes Rottweilers are the best choice of family dog because, unlike other dogs, they are both family-friendly and protectors; however, labs are the better choice because..."
6. **Work on your word choice.** Identify the verbs in your thesis. Are they specific? Generic verbs, like *is, are, to be, to do, to think*, should be addressed by choosing a more specific action to replace them. The same applies to adjectives or overly-wordy language.
7. **Put it in the right place.** The thesis should be near the end of your introductory paragraph or introductory section.

There are many types of thesis statements. While all thesis statements establish the argument in your paper, it is important to determine which one best fits the kind of paper you are writing. You can find some examples of different types of thesis statements on the following pages.

Research paper thesis statements

Research paper writing is text-based. Texts include books, articles, artifacts, journals, anthologies, etc. Specifically for PAID 111 and 112 students, the research unit requires students to create an argumentative thesis supported by evidence from research on your assigned topic.

- **Okay example:** “Human performance is enhanced by a good night’s rest.”

This thesis states the author’s claim, but does little to introduce support for their argument. It also fails to argue a point that can be counter-argued.

- **Better example:** “Sufficient sleep enhances human performance more than a proper diet.”

Word choice has improved with this thesis, but the author has yet to build credibility with the audience by stating evidence for their claims within the thesis.

- **Best example:** “Proven by [name of scientist/research]’s experiment [name of experiments], sufficient rest enhances human performance more than a proper diet because anybody, regardless of physical health, can be degraded by improper rest.”

In this final example, the author has acknowledged credible sources, stated their claim, and given a reason for the reader to believe that claim.

Ask your instructor whether it is appropriate to use the first person “I” when writing a research-based thesis. Sometimes we feel inclined to begin a thesis with “I believe _____ ...” However, the first person is unnecessary. Because you are the author of the paper, it is implied that the thesis is your opinion on the subject matter.

Analytical arguments (textual analysis)

Analytical arguments or textual analysis writing involves examining a text and creating an argument based on an aspect of that text. Essentially, the writer of an analytical essay is digging deeper into the meaning of the text and analyzing specific motives, actions, or reasons for why some things occur in the text.

- **Okay example:** “There are sad feelings found in *The Catcher in the Rye*.”

The thesis states what the author has noticed in the novel but fails to state how their claim is supported within the book. The meaning of “sad feelings” is unclear to the reader.

- **Better example:** “Parts of Salinger’s *The Catcher in the Rye* add feelings of loneliness and uncertainty throughout the novel.”

In this example, the author is more specific with their word choice and claim. However, the author could still be more specific in the reasoning behind why they are making the claim about loneliness and uncertainty.

- **Best example:** “The symbolism found in Salinger’s *The Catcher in the Rye* contributes to the sense of loneliness and uncertainty found within the novel through both the red hunting hat and the museum displays.”

This thesis is more specific because it includes the element of the novel that contributes to the feelings of sadness and melancholy and allows an argument to be made within the paper. Throughout the paper, the writer would then have to discuss the individual pieces of symbolism that contribute to this idea.

Historical arguments

Historical arguments are based on historical evidence. It is important to analyze the author's bias and perspective when evaluating historical evidence. Understanding the cultural context of your topic will help guide you.

- **Okay example:** "This paper will discuss Harry Truman's decision to drop the bomb on Hiroshima."

This statement is more of a topic sentence rather than a thesis statement. Topic sentences introduce new sub-ideas that fit within the thesis statement, but they do not serve as thesis statements. Can this sentence be argued?

- **Better example:** "Truman's decision to drop the bomb on Hiroshima was bad."

This thesis makes a statement, but it is very vague. Specific language is important to make a claim about an issue or to respond properly to your professor's prompt. The use of the word "bad" is difficult to defend without a specific definition of what the author means by "bad".

- **Best example:** "Harry Truman's decision to drop an atomic bomb on Hiroshima was motivated by racism."

This thesis is specific, arguable, and effectively introduces readers to the topic of the paper.

Policy arguments

A policy argument focuses on facts, claims, and judgments and is based on the course of action a reader should take. The thesis should argue for or against a certain solution or policy approach to a specific problem. Understanding all components of the policy will help you when writing this type of argument.

- **Okay example:** "I do not think school uniforms should be in schools."

While this thesis statement does make a claim, it uses first person point of view making the argument less credible. Additionally, there are no reasons present to sway the reader

- **Better example:** "School uniforms should not be implemented into schools because they harm students."

This thesis statement has a clear, direct argument; however, it is not specific in the reasons why a reader should take action on this policy.

- **Best example:** "Although some may disagree, school uniforms do not belong in the classroom because it denies students freedom of expression and promotes conformity over individuality."

In the final example, the thesis statement gives readers specific reasons why they should take action against school uniforms. Additionally, it is to the point and is arguing for a certain approach to a controversial problem present in the world.

Expository/Explanatory arguments

In a paper, an expository thesis statement gives key aspects about a topic that will be discussed in the paper. This type of thesis statement explains to the reader why the key aspects listed support the main topic of the paper.

- **Okay example:** “This paper is going to be about student success.”

In this thesis statement, we know the paper will be about student success, but we don’t know what will be specifically talked about concerning the topic. The paper could be about how to obtain student success or students who are successful as it is unclear what the topic is about.

- **Better example:** “Student success is affected by many things.”

Now, we know that the topic is going to be about how one can achieve success as a student. However, there are no specific details as to how one can be successful as a student.

- **Best example:** “Factors related to student success include effective time management, motivation, and family support.”

This final statement contains a topic the paper is about (student success) and the specific key aspects (effective time management, motivation, and family support) that support the main topic. It is clear, concise, and to the point.

Sources

Open the online version of this handout for clickable links.

- ["Thesis Statements"](#) (University of North Carolina Writing Center).
- ["Tips & Tools"](#) (University of North Carolina Writing Center).
- ["Thesis Statements"](#) (University of Mary Washington History and American Studies Department)
- Ryan, Leigh, and Lisa Zimmerelli. *The Bedford Guide for Writing Tutors*. Bedford/St. Martins, 2016.
- ["5 Types of Thesis Statements"](#) (University of Guelph McLaughlin Library).
- ["Writing a Thesis Statement"](#) (University of Arizona Writing Center).