

How to Write a Thesis Statement

Your thesis statement SHOULD:

1. be focused enough to make a specific claim
2. be a little strange (In other words, it should assert something that seems wrong or odd to begin with. You will then make sense of it as you move through the paper.)
3. be able to fit into this structure:
 - By looking at _____, we can see _____, which most people do not see; this is important because _____.

A Good Thesis IS:

Argumentative: It makes a case. Making an argument creates the sharpest contrast between a thesis and a topic – a topic is something like “Savagery in *Lord of the Flies*.” This represents a topic, not an argument. A thesis, on the other hand, makes a specific argument; it tries to prove something. One way to tell a thesis from a topic: if it lacks an active verb, it fails the thesis test.

Controversial: This does not include statements like, “Abortionists should be shot,” or “George W. Bush’s election was illegitimate” – it means that it has to be possible for an intelligent person to disagree with your thesis on an intellectual level rather than purely emotional. If everyone agrees at first sight, your thesis is too obvious and not worth writing about.

Analytical (not evaluative): A paper does not present the appropriate forum to praise or blame historical figures or events. “Finding Freedom is a wonderful enduring expression of the human spirit,” and “‘Like A Winding Street’ stinks in its choice of narrative techniques” are inappropriate.

Specific: Resist vague generalities. Some students want to write their paper on man and God or on the black experience in the Twentieth Century. Both present over-reaching arguments incapable of producing a thorough paper. Get your hands dirty with the ideas your paper is struggling with.

Well-Supported: If you cannot support your thesis, find another thesis.

A Good Thesis IS NOT:

A Non-Thesis Thesis: A thesis takes a position on an issue. It is different from a topic sentence in that a thesis statement takes a side. It announces, in addition to the topic, the argument you want to make or the point you want to prove. This is your own opinion that you intend to back up. This is your reason and motivation for writing. If it's not interesting to you, find another thesis.

Bad Thesis: In Night, Elie Wiesel shows that many people suffered during the Holocaust.

Better Thesis: Even though there were resistance groups who fought against the Nazi Party, the suffering of millions must be studied to prevent further tragedies.

An Overly-Broad Thesis: A thesis should be as specific as possible, and it should be tailored to reflect the scope of the paper. In addition to simply choosing a smaller topic, strategies to narrow a thesis include specifying a method of perspective or outlining certain limits.

Bad Thesis: There should be no dress code in public schools.

Better Thesis: Students who already feel restricted by the bell schedule of the school day should not be forced to dress alike as well because it smothers individuality and personal expression.

An Incontestable Thesis: A thesis must be arguable. In order for it to be arguable, it must present a view that someone might reasonably contest. Sometimes a thesis ultimately says, "We should be good," or "bad things are bad." Such thesis statements are so universally accepted that there is no need to prove the point.

Bad Thesis: Elie Wiesel was brave because he sure went through a lot.

Better Thesis: Although Elie Wiesel had a ten-year vow of silence after his experiences in concentration camps, his resulting work Night powerfully demonstrates the value of writing about true horror.

A "List Essay Thesis: A good, argumentative thesis provides not only a position on an issue, but also suggests the structure of the paper. The thesis should allow the reader to imagine and anticipate the flow of the paper, in which a sequence of points logically prove the essay's main assertion. A list essay provides no such structure, so that different points and paragraphs appear arbitrary with no logical connection to one another.

Bad Thesis: There are many reasons why I love Mint Chocolate Chip ice cream.

Better Thesis: Mint Chocolate Chip ice cream is the best flavor in the world because it is a classic flavor that has lasted over time. It incorporates chocolate into its favor, and it contributes to a beautiful color scheme when placed in a hot fudge sundae.

Adapted From: <http://english.upenn.edu/grad/teacherweb/thesis.html>