

A Practical Guide to Thesis Statements

Any college-level paper requires the use of a thesis statement to focus the research one is trying to do. Below is a brief introduction to thesis statements and some “tricks of the trade” to help you out as you begin your research.

What is a Thesis Statement?

A good thesis statement is:

- Clear and concise
- Assertive and confident
- Takes a stand
- Answers the research question
- Addresses an audience
- Demonstrates a clear purpose for the rest of the paper
- Reflects your viewpoint without using “I”
- Answers the “So what?” question adequately

Thesis Theory

- Think of the thesis as joining intellectual dialogue
 - *A good thesis is arguable - it is one take on a topic and could be refuted in dialogue
- A thesis statement is geared towards “reasonable people” - it doesn’t make rash generalizations or form hasty conclusions

Questions to Ask Yourself:

- Could a reasonable person draw different conclusions from my data/examples?
- Am I making assumptions?
- Who is my audience?
- What is my purpose for this paper? Does my research reflect this purpose? (Note: the thesis states the purpose of the paper)
- What is my evidence? Does my thesis accurately encompass all my data?
- Am I being dogmatic (i.e. am I making assumptions)?
- Is my thesis too obvious? (usually an indicator that the thesis is not narrow enough)
- Does it require the length prescribed to answer?
- **So what?**

Tricks of the Trade

- Try cause/effect. Use words like *although, while, because of, etc...*
- Make an arguable value judgment (*Argument A is better than Argument B because...*)
- Avoid vagueness or generalization
 - Avoid words like *all, ever, always, never, interesting*
 - Use words like *most, many, usually, seldom*
- Formulate your thesis around a center as you research. In other words, as you research continually narrow down to a specific focus.
 - Ex: Architecture → Domes → Roman domes vs. Byzantine domes¹
- Avoid listing (*My paper argues this aspect by points A, B, and C*). Instead, form an argument that is supported by points A, B and C. (see *Example #2* below)

¹ Joseph Gibaldi, *MLA Handbook for Writers of research Papers, 7th ed.*, New York: The Modern Language Assoc, 2003, 7.

- When tempted to use first person (“I” or “we”), either use the plural (e.g. “people think that...”) or if forced, use “one” (i.e. “one thinks that...”)
- Talk to your professor!

Examples²

1. *Much maligned and the subject of unwarranted fears, most bats are harmless and highly beneficial.*

- **Stand:** Bats are harmless and actually beneficial
- **Purpose of paper:** to explain how bats are harmless and beneficial
- **So What?:** Bats have traditionally been subjects of undeserved fear

2. *By granting college students liberal lending arrangements, credit card companies often hook them on a cycle of spending that can ultimately lead to financial ruin.*

- **Stand:** Credit card companies are at fault for high student debt.
- **Purpose of paper:** to demonstrate how credit card companies trap unsuspecting students with liberal lending arrangements
- **So What?:** Students are unaware of this particular situation, and thus should be informed so as to avoid financial ruin.

² from Diana Hacker, *The Writer's Reference*, 6th ed., Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2007, 10, 15.