3.5: Effective Thesis Statements

What is a Thesis Statement?

• A thesis statement tells a reader how you will interpret the significance of the subject matter under discussion. Such a statement is also called an “argument,” a “main idea,” or a “controlling idea.”

• A good thesis has two parts. It should tell what you plan to argue, and it should “telegraph” how you plan to argue—that is, what particular support for your claim is going where in your essay.

• A standard place for your thesis is at the end of the introductory paragraph.

• A thesis is an interpretation of a subject, not the subject itself. The subject, or topic, of an essay might be World War II or Moby Dick; a thesis must then offer a way to understand the war or the novel that others might dispute.

• A strong thesis not only grabs the interest of your reader, who now wants to see you support your unique interpretation, it also provides a focus for your argument, one to which every part of your paper refers in the development of your position.

• A thesis keeps the writer centered on the matter at hand and reduces the risk of intellectual wandering. Likewise, a thesis provides the reader with a “road map,” clearly laying out the intellectual route ahead.

• A thesis statement avoids the first person (“I believe,” “In my opinion”).

A simple equation for what a thesis might look like this:

What you plan to argue + How you plan to argue it = Thesis
Specific Topic+ Attitude/Argument=Thesis
Steps To Write Effective Thesis Statement

• Choose a prompt or, if appropriate, select a topic: television violence and children
• Read the prompt carefully or, if appropriate, ask an interesting question:
  ◦ What are the effects of television violence on children?
• Revise the prompt or question into a preliminary or “working” thesis:
  ◦ Violence on television increases aggressive behavior in children.
• Avoid general phrasing and/or sweeping words such as “all” or “none” or “every”.
• Lead the reader toward the topic sentences (the subtopics needed to prove the thesis).
• 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.)
  ◦ Violence on television increases aggressive behavior in children.
• This statement is on its way to being a thesis. However, it is too easy to imagine possible counter-arguments. For example, an observer of societal trends may believe that parenting or easy access to weapons are important factors in youth violence. If you complicate your thesis by anticipating the counter-argument, you’ll strengthen your argument, as shown in the sentence below.
  ◦ While poor parenting and easy access to weapons may act as contributory factors, in fact when children are exposed to television violence they become less sensitive to the pain and suffering of others, are more fearful of the world around them, and are more likely to behave in aggressive or harmful ways toward others.

The Components of an Effective Thesis Statement

• You can’t just pluck a thesis out of thin air. Even if you have a terrific insight concerning a topic, it won’t be worth much unless you can logically and persuasively support it in the body of your essay. A thesis is the evolutionary result of a thinking process, not a miraculous creation. Formulating a thesis is not the first thing you do after reading an essay assignment.
• An effective thesis statement fulfills the following criteria
  ◦ Substantial—Your thesis should be a claim for which it is easy to answer every reader’s question: “So what?”
  ◦ Supportable — A thesis must be a claim that you can prove with the evidence at hand (e.g., evidence from your texts or from your research). Your claim should not be outlandish, nor should it be mere personal opinion or preference (e.g., “Frederick Douglass is my favorite historical figure.”) It tackles a subject that could be adequately covered in the format of the project assigned.
  ◦ Precise — It is focused and specific. A strong thesis proves a point without discussing everything. It clearly asserts your own conclusion based on evidence. Note: Be flexible. It is perfectly okay to change your thesis!
  ◦ Arguable — It should be contestable, proposing an arguable point with which people could reasonably disagree.
  ◦ Relevant — If you are responding to an assignment, the thesis should answer the question your teacher has posed. In order to stay focused, pay attention to the task words in the assignment: summarize, argue, compare/contrast, etc.
  ◦ Aware of Counters—It anticipitates and refutes the counter-arguments.
The best thesis statement is a balance of specific details and concise language. Your goal is to articulate an argument in detail without burdening the reader with too much information.

Questions To Review Your Thesis

• “Do I answer the question?” This might seem obvious, but it’s worth asking. No matter how intriguing or dazzling, a thesis that doesn’t answer the question is not a good thesis!

• “Have I taken a position that others might challenge or oppose?” If not, then you probably do not have a strong argument. Theses that are too vague often have this problem. If your thesis contains vague words like “good” or “successful,” see if you could be more specific: why is something “good”; what makes something “successful”?

• Would anyone possible care about this thesis? So What? Does your thesis present a position or an interpretation worth pursuing? If a reader’s first response is, “So what?” then you need to clarify, to forge a relationship, or to connect to a larger issue.

• “Does my essay support my thesis specifically and without wandering?” Just as a thesis that doesn’t answer the question ultimately fails, so does a thesis that isn’t properly supported with evidence and reasoning.

• Does my thesis statement adequately address the direction words of the prompt: summarize, argue, compare/contrast, analyze, discuss, etc.?

Myths about Thesis Statements

• Every paper requires one. Assignments that ask you to write personal responses or to explore a subject don’t want you to seem to pre-judge the issues. Essays of literary interpretation often want you to be aware of many effects rather than seeming to box yourself into one view of the text.

• A thesis statement must come at the end of the first paragraph. This is a natural position for a statement of focus, but it’s not the only one. Some theses can be stated in the opening sentences of an essay; others need a paragraph or two of introduction; others can’t be fully formulated until the end.

• A thesis statement must be one sentence in length, no matter how many clauses it contains. Clear writing is more important than rules like these. Use two or three sentences if you need them. A complex argument may require a whole tightly-knit paragraph to make its initial statement of position.

• You can’t start writing an essay until you have a perfect thesis statement. It may be advisable to draft a hypothesis or tentative thesis statement near the start of a big project, but changing and refining a thesis is a main task of thinking your way through your ideas as you write a paper. And some essay projects need to explore the question in depth without being locked in before they can provide even a tentative answer.

• A thesis statement must give three points of support. It should indicate that the essay will explain and give evidence for its assertion, but points don’t need to come in any specific number.

Progressively Complex Thesis Statements

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Thesis Statement</th>
<th>Evaluation</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The North and South fought the Civil War for many reasons, some of which were the same and some different.</td>
<td>The worst thesis imaginable (other than non-existent). You’ve said nothing of value.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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While both sides fought the Civil War over the issue of slavery, the North fought for moral reasons while the South fought to preserve its own institutions.

While there were many underlying causes of the Civil War, three factors converged to make conflict inevitable: the issue of slavery, the idea of states’ rights, and the fight to control the future of the West.

While both Northerners and Southerners believed they fought against tyranny and oppression, Northerners focused on the oppression of slaves while Southerners defended their own rights to property and self-government.

A good pre-draft thesis. Not a bad start at all. Here’s the catch, and the time consuming part of the process. As you write, your argument may become more refined or changed. When it does, so should the thesis.

A solid preview of your argument and the main points you intend to make. This would be a strong approach for a persuasive or exemplification essay.

Bien! The thesis statement is nuanced, recognizing the existence of an opposing point of view, while strongly defending your point. It is relatively specific, yet concise—and doesn’t make the reader want to stop reading.