

An Introduction to Thesis Statements

This handout is an introduction to writing effective thesis statements. Here you can read about what a thesis statement is, why they are important to English Academic Writing, why and when you need them, and what makes a good thesis statement “good.” For a handout on the process of developing a thesis statement, see our handout [“How to Develop a Thesis Statement.”](#)

What is a thesis statement?

A thesis statement...

- makes an **argumentative assertion**, or claim, about a topic.
- **is contestable**; that is, it can be refuted, disagreed with, countered. Thus, a thesis statement is not a statement of fact, e.g., “The wall fell in Germany in 1989.”
- stakes an **informed position supported with evidence**. Thus, a thesis is not merely an opinion, e.g., “The fall of communism is the worst thing that’s ever happened to Europe.”

Because the style and form of thesis statements depend on the content of a paper and disciplinary conventions, not all theses follow an identical model. However, successful thesis statements generally have the following additional characteristics:

- They make a promise to the reader about the **scope** (the specific area it will cover, e.g. on food imagery and metaphor in *Hamlet*, rather than *all of Hamlet*), **purpose** (or the significance of the argument being made), and **direction** (or the supporting reasons of your argument) of your paper. In other words, in addition to stating *what* you will argue, they indicate *how* your argument will progress.
- They are **focused** and **specific** enough to be “proven” within the boundaries (vis-a-vis topic, page limits, methodology, evidence available to you, etc.) of your paper.
- They are generally **located near the end of the introduction**; sometimes, in a long paper, the thesis will be expressed in several sentences or in an entire paragraph (Hacker/Sommers 2015).

Thesis statements are not synonymous with research questions. The former stake a claim and indicate a line of argumentation; the latter pose a question/problem and indicate a line of inquiry. Depending on the kind of paper you are writing and the discipline in which you are writing, your thesis might be:

- Your answer to a question.
- The resolution for or solution to a problem
- A statement that announces your position in an ongoing scholarly debate.
- Your conclusions about the meaning and/or significance of a data set, cultural object, literary text, etc. (Hacker/Sommers 2015).

Why do I need a thesis statement?

To students brought up in European traditions of writing, it may seem odd or even counterintuitive to state your conclusions in the introduction. Indeed, the Anglo-American thesis-based paper inverts the basic structure of a European paper:

European	Anglo-American
Question	Thesis
Review of possible answers to question in an evaluation/analysis/interpretation of evidence	Justification of thesis in an evaluation/analysis/interpretation of evidence; addresses counterarguments
Conclusive answer to question	Restatement of thesis

The Anglo-American model is **reader-oriented**: it presents a clear, succinct argument from the beginning, easing the reader's burden of understanding and saving them time. This is not to say that one model is superior to the other; in fact, it could be argued that the writer-oriented model of European texts allows for more ambiguity, uncertainty, and complexity in scientific writing. But readers of English academic texts appreciate a direct approach and will expect to know the author's main point by the end of the introduction.

When do I need a thesis statement?

Thesis statements organize papers that present an argument and attempt to persuade readers of a specific position. Thus, because not all assignments require an argument—non-argumentative text genres include exposés or excerpts, book/article reviews, annotated bibliographies, etc.—*not all papers require thesis statements!* If you are unsure, **ask your instructor**.

What are some examples of effective thesis statements?

On the following page are some examples of effective thesis statements in undergraduate writing from across the disciplines. Take note:

- Thesis statements are generally longer for longer papers, and even in shorter papers, thesis statements can be set up over several sentences.
- Thesis statements should stake a paper's central claim, but the rest of the introduction is important as well. Therefore, as you evaluate *how* each of the following thesis statements is effective using the checklist of questions on the left, you might also reflect on the limits of the thesis statement, and what else needs to be present in an introduction for an argument to be effective.

Thesis Checklist:

Does the thesis clearly *respond to a problem, answer a question, or provide an interpretation?*

Does it make an *argumentative assertion* that can be contested and supported by evidence?

Do you have a clear idea of the *scope, purpose, and direction* of the paper to follow? Can you anticipate how the argument will be supported—what evidence will be analyzed, what supporting arguments will be presented?

Is the thesis *specific* enough to be adequately defended in a paper of its length?

Just as his “Prelude” is often perceived to be a rewriting of Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, “Nutting,” too, can be read as [William] Wordsworth’s reinterpretation of the Fall of Man. But rather than merely presenting man’s fall from God’s grace, Wordsworth traces the protagonist’s transformation from humility before Nature to a narcissistic sense of entitlement to its riches, the psychological process that brings about the boy’s sin against Nature and subsequent Fall.

Eliana Dockterman, English literature, 4-6 pages

However, it can be argued that in some cases ethics committees serve primarily to pause the funding process for scientific developments until the public moral framework shifts to accommodate the previously controversial advancement. [...] A close examination of U.S. federal legislation, United Nations declarations, and media coverage regarding human cloning in the wake of Dolly [the sheep, 1997] reveals that, in practice, ethics committees have delayed the making of moral decisions rather than issued such judgments on human cloning.

Lindsay Gellman, Philosophy, 10 pages

However, a closer look at the Elm City reveals that, even at its peak, it was never representative of a true human connection to nature. Rather, it is another instance of exploitation, another example of our misunderstanding of the environment we live in. The urban trees, quite simply, were utilized by the American people, much as other New World trees were—it just so happened that the American elm was worth more alive than cut down.

Rebecca Ju, Environmental Studies, 13 pages

By amplifying the elitist cult of violence through imagery, the Abu Ghraib photographs [2004] functioned in the sphere of Fascist art that [Walter] Benjamin disdained. They do not operate as part of a Marxist revolution against authoritarianism, [as Benjamin’s theory of photography would have anticipated,] thanks to both the content of the photos and their function among American troops.

Stephanie Lynch, Cultural Studies, 5 pages

By examining the relationship between the privatization of the Iraqi oil industry and that of the US military forces, my research seeks to unite the often-disparate inquiries into Iraqi oil, US imperialism, and military contractors. An investigation into the parallel drives to privatize helps understand the crimes of the Iraq War: torture, such as at the infamous Abu Ghraib prison; attacks on civilian populations; the destruction of infrastructure and civilian institutions, and above all, the immense loss of life. I suggest that the privatization of military forces shielded individual contractors and the Bush administration from criticism, further allowing the US government to bypass accountability. Thus, the privatization of military forces enabled US violence. The United States employed this violence, in turn, to privatize Iraq.

Rosa Shapiro-Thompson, American History, 15 pages

Works Cited:

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