

## How to Generate a Thesis Statement if the Topic is not Assigned.

Even if your assignment doesn't ask a specific question, your thesis statement still needs to answer a question about the issue you'd like to explore. In this situation, your job is to figure out what question you'd like to write about.

A good thesis statement will usually include the following four attributes:

- take on a subject upon which reasonable people could disagree
- deal with a subject that can be adequately treated given the nature of the assignment
- express one main idea
- assert your conclusions about a subject

Let's see how to generate a thesis statement for a social policy paper.

### *Brainstorm the topic.*

Let's say that your class focuses upon the problems posed by changes in the dietary habits of Americans. You find that you are interested in the amount of sugar Americans consume.

You start out with a thesis statement like this:

### **Sugar consumption.**

This fragment isn't a thesis statement. Instead, it simply indicates a general subject. Furthermore, your reader doesn't know what you want to say about sugar consumption.

### *Narrow the topic.*

Your readings about the topic, however, have led you to the conclusion that elementary school children are consuming far more sugar than is healthy.

You change your thesis to look like this:

### **Reducing sugar consumption by elementary school children.**

This fragment not only announces your subject, but it focuses on one segment of the population: elementary school children. Furthermore, it raises a subject upon which reasonable people could disagree, because while most people might agree that children consume more sugar than they used to, not everyone would agree on what should be done or who should do it. You should note that this fragment is not a thesis statement because your reader doesn't know your conclusions on the topic.

### *Take a position on the topic.*

After reflecting on the topic a little while longer, you decide that what you really want to say about this topic is that something should be done to reduce the amount of sugar these children consume.

You revise your thesis statement to look like this:

### **More attention should be paid to the food and beverage choices available to elementary school children.**

This statement asserts your position, but the terms *more attention* and *food and beverage choices* are vague.

### *Use specific language.*

You decide to explain what you mean about *food and beverage choices*, so you write:

**Experts estimate that half of elementary school children consume nine times the recommended daily allowance of sugar.**

This statement is specific, but it isn't a thesis. It merely reports a statistic instead of making an assertion.

*Make an assertion based on clearly stated support.*

You finally revise your thesis statement one more time to look like this:

**Because half of all American elementary school children consume nine times the recommended daily allowance of sugar, schools should be required to replace the beverages in soda machines with healthy alternatives.**

Notice how the thesis answers the question, "What should be done to reduce sugar consumption by children, and who should do it?" When you started thinking about the paper, you may not have had a specific question in mind, but as you became more involved in the topic, your ideas became more specific. Your thesis changed to reflect your new insights.

### **How to Tell a Strong Thesis Statement from a Weak One.**

#### **1. A strong thesis statement takes some sort of stand.**

Remember that your thesis needs to show your conclusions about a subject. For example, if you are writing a paper for a class on fitness, you might be asked to choose a popular weight-loss product to evaluate. Here are two thesis statements:

**There are some negative and positive aspects to the Banana Herb Tea Supplement.**

This is a weak thesis statement. First, it fails to take a stand. Second, the phrase *negative and positive aspects* is vague.

**Because Banana Herb Tea Supplement promotes rapid weight loss that results in the loss of muscle and lean body mass, it poses a potential danger to customers.**

This is a strong thesis because it takes a stand, and because it's specific.

#### **2. A strong thesis statement justifies discussion.**

Your thesis should indicate the point of the discussion. If your assignment is to write a paper on kinship systems, using your own family as an example, you might come up with either of these two thesis statements:

**My family is an extended family.**

This is a weak thesis because it merely states an observation. Your reader won't be able to tell the point of the statement, and will probably stop reading.

**While most American families would view consanguineal marriage as a threat to the nuclear family structure, many Iranian families, like my own, believe that these marriages help reinforce kinship ties in an extended family.**

This is a strong thesis because it shows how your experience contradicts a widely-accepted view. A good strategy for creating a strong thesis is to show that the topic is controversial. Readers will be interested in reading the rest of the essay to see how you support your point.

#### **3. A strong thesis statement expresses one main idea.**

Readers need to be able to see that your paper has one main point. If your thesis statement expresses more than one idea, then you might confuse your readers about the subject of your paper. For example:

**Companies need to exploit the marketing potential of the Internet, and Web pages can provide both advertising and customer support.**

This is a weak thesis statement because the reader can't decide whether the paper is about marketing on the Internet or Web pages. To revise the thesis, the relationship between the two ideas needs to become more clear. One way to revise the thesis would be to write:

**Because the Internet is filled with tremendous marketing potential, companies should exploit this potential by using Web pages that offer both advertising and customer support.**

This is a strong thesis because it shows that the two ideas are related. Hint: a great many clear and engaging thesis statements contain words like *because*, *since*, *so*, *although*, *unless*, and *however*.

#### **4. A strong thesis statement is specific.**

A thesis statement should show exactly what your paper will be about, and will help you keep your paper to a manageable topic. For example, if you're writing a seven-to-ten page paper on hunger, you might say:

**World hunger has many causes and effects.**

This is a weak thesis statement for two major reasons. First, *world hunger* can't be discussed thoroughly in seven to ten pages. Second, *many causes and effects* is vague. You should be able to identify specific causes and effects. A revised thesis might look like this:

**Hunger persists in Glandelinia because jobs are scarce and farming in the infertile soil is rarely profitable.**

This is a strong thesis statement because it narrows the subject to a more specific and manageable topic, and it also identifies the specific causes for the existence of hunger.

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## ***What Makes a Good Literature Paper?***

### **An argument**

When you write an extended literary essay, often one requiring research, you are essentially making an argument. You are arguing that your perspective—an interpretation, an evaluative judgment, or a critical evaluation—is a valid one.

### **A debatable thesis statement**

Like any argument paper you have ever written for a first-year composition course, you must have a specific, detailed thesis statement that reveals your perspective, and, like any good argument, your perspective must be one which is debatable.

### **Examples**

You would **not** want to make an argument of this sort:

**Shakespeare's Hamlet is a play about a young man who seeks revenge.**

That doesn't say anything—it's basically just a summary and is hardly debatable.

A better thesis would be this:

**Hamlet experiences internal conflict because he is in love with his mother.**

That is debatable, controversial even. The rest of a paper with this argument as its thesis will be an attempt to show, using specific examples from the text and evidence from scholars, (1) *how* Hamlet is in love with his mother, (2) *why* he's in love with her, and (3) *what* implications there are for reading the play in this manner.

You also want to avoid a thesis statement like this:

**Spirituality means different things to different people. King Lear, The Book of Romans, and Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance each view the spirit differently.**

Again, that says nothing that's not already self-evident. Why bother writing a paper about that? You're not writing an essay to list works that have nothing in common other than a general topic like "spirituality." You want to find certain works or authors that, while they may have several differences, do have some specific, unifying point. That point is your thesis.

A better thesis would be this:

**Lear, Romans, and Zen each view the soul as the center of human personality.**

Then you prove it, using examples from the texts that show that the soul is the center of personality.

Suppose you are taking a course on 19th-century America, and the instructor hands out the following essay assignment: Compare and contrast the reasons why the North and South fought the Civil War. You turn on the computer and type out the following:

*The North and South fought the Civil War for many reasons, some of which were the same and some different.*

This weak thesis restates the question without providing any additional information. You will expand on this new information in the body of the essay, but it is important that the reader know where you are heading. A reader of this weak thesis might think, "What reasons? How are they the same? How are they different?" Ask yourself these same questions and begin to compare Northern and Southern attitudes (perhaps you first think, "The South believed slavery was right, and the North thought slavery was wrong"). Now, push your comparison toward an interpretation—why did one side think slavery was right and the other side think it was wrong? You look again at the evidence, and you decide that you are going to argue that the North believed slavery was immoral while the South believed it upheld the Southern way of life. You write:

*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.*

Now you have a working thesis! Included in this working thesis is a reason for the war and some idea of how the two sides disagreed over this reason. As you write the essay, you will probably begin to characterize these differences more precisely, and your working thesis may start to seem too vague. Maybe you decide that both sides fought for moral reasons, and that they just focused on different moral issues. You end up revising the working thesis into a final thesis that really captures the argument in your paper:

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

Compare this to the original weak thesis. This final thesis presents a way of *interpreting* evidence that illuminates the significance of the question. *Keep in mind that this is one of many possible interpretations of the Civil War—it is not the one and only right answer to the question.* There isn't one right answer; there are only strong and weak thesis statements and strong and weak uses of evidence.

Let's look at another example. Suppose your literature professor hands out the following assignment in a class on the American novel: Write an analysis of some aspect of Mark Twain's novel *Huckleberry Finn*. "This will be easy," you think. "I loved *Huckleberry Finn*!" You grab a pad of paper and write:

*Mark Twain's Huckleberry Finn is a great American novel.*

Why is this thesis weak? Think about what the reader would expect from the essay that follows: you will most likely provide a general, appreciative summary of Twain's novel. The question did not ask you to summarize; it asked you to analyze. Your professor is probably not interested in your opinion of the novel; instead, she wants you to think about *why* it's such a great novel—what do Huck's adventures tell us about life, about America, about coming of age, about race relations, etc.? First, the question asks you to pick an aspect of the novel that you think is important to its structure or meaning—for example, the role of storytelling, the contrasting scenes between the shore and the river, or the relationships between adults and children. Now you write:

*In Huckleberry Finn, Mark Twain develops a contrast between life on the river and life on the shore.*

Here's a working thesis with potential: you have highlighted an important aspect of the novel for investigation; however, it's still not clear what your analysis will reveal. Your reader is intrigued, but is still thinking, "So what? What's the point of this contrast? What does it signify?" Perhaps you are not sure yet, either. That's fine—begin to work on comparing scenes from the book and see what you discover. Free write, make lists, jot down Huck's actions and reactions. Eventually you will be able to clarify for yourself,

and then for the reader, why this contrast matters. After examining the evidence and considering your own insights, you write:

*Through its contrasting river and shore scenes, Twain's Huckleberry Finn suggests that to find the true expression of American democratic ideals, one must leave "civilized" society and go back to nature.*

This final thesis statement presents an interpretation of a literary work based on an analysis of its content. Of course, for the essay itself to be successful, you must now present evidence from the novel that will convince the reader of your interpretation.

### **Questions to Ask When Formulating Your Thesis** **: Where is your thesis statement?**

You should provide a thesis early in your essay -- in the introduction, or in longer essays in the second paragraph -- in order to establish your position and give your reader a sense of direction.

**Tip:** In order to write a successful thesis statement:

: Avoid burying a great thesis statement in the middle of a paragraph or late in the paper.

: Be as clear and as specific as possible; avoid vague words.

: Indicate the point of your paper but avoid sentence structures like, "The point of my paper is..."

### **: Is your thesis statement specific?**

Your thesis statement should be as clear and specific as possible. Normally you will continue to refine your thesis as you revise your argument(s), so your thesis will evolve and gain definition as you obtain a better sense of where your argument is taking you.

**Tip:** Check your thesis:

: Are there two large statements connected loosely by a coordinating conjunction (i.e. "and," "but," "or," "for," "nor," "so," "yet")?

: Would a subordinating conjunction help (i.e. "through," "although," "because," "since") to signal a relationship between the two sentences?

: Or do the two statements imply a fuzzy unfocused thesis?

: If so, settle on one single focus and then proceed with further development.:

### **Is your thesis statement too general?**

Your thesis should be limited to what can be accomplished in the specified number of pages. Shape your topic so that you can get straight to the "meat" of it. Being specific in your paper will be much more successful than writing about general things that do not say much. Don't settle for three pages of just skimming the surface.

The opposite of a focused, narrow, crisp thesis is a broad, sprawling, superficial thesis. Compare this original thesis (too general) with three possible revisions (more focused, each presenting a different approach to the same topic):

### **Original thesis:**

There are serious objections to today's horror movies.

**Revised theses:**

- : Because modern cinematic techniques have allowed filmmakers to get more graphic, horror flicks have desensitized young American viewers to violence.
- : The pornographic violence in "bloodbath" slasher movies degrades both men and women.
- : Today's slasher movies fail to deliver the emotional catharsis that 1930s horror films did.

**: Is your thesis statement clear?**

Your thesis statement is no exception to your writing: it needs to be as clear as possible. By being as clear as possible in your thesis statement, you will make sure that your reader understands exactly what you mean.

**Tip:** In order to be as clear as possible in your writing:

- : Unless you're writing a technical report, avoid technical language. Always avoid jargon, unless you are confident your audience will be familiar with it.
  - : Avoid vague words such as "interesting," "negative," "exciting," "unusual," and "difficult."
  - : Avoid abstract words such as "society," "values," or "culture."
- These words tell the reader next to nothing if you do not carefully explain what you mean by them. Never assume that the meaning of a sentence is obvious. Check to see if you need to define your terms ("socialism," "conventional," "commercialism," "society"), and then decide on the most appropriate place to do so. Do not assume, for example, that you have the same understanding of what "society" means as your reader. To avoid misunderstandings, be as specific as possible.

Compare the original thesis (not specific and clear enough) with the revised version (much more specific and clear):

**Original thesis:** Although the timber wolf is a timid and gentle animal, it is being systematically exterminated. [if it's so timid and gentle -- why is it being exterminated?]

**Revised thesis:** Although the timber wolf is actually a timid and gentle animal, it is being systematically exterminated because people wrongfully believe it to be a fierce and cold-blooded killer.

**: Does your thesis include a comment about your position on the issue at hand?**

The thesis statement should do more than merely announce the topic; it must reveal what position you will take in relation to that topic, how you plan to analyze/evaluate the subject or the issue. In short, instead of merely stating a general fact or resorting to a simplistic pro/con statement, you must decide what it is you have to say.

**Tips:** Avoid merely announcing the topic; your original and specific "angle" should be clear. In this way you will tell your reader why your take on the issue matters.

**Original thesis:** In this paper, I will discuss the relationship between fairy tales and early childhood.

**Revised thesis:** Not just empty stories for kids, fairy tales shed light on the psychology of young children.

Avoid making universal or pro/con judgments that oversimplify complex issues.

**Original thesis:** We must save the whales.

**Revised thesis:** Because our planet's health may depend upon biological diversity, we should save the whales.

When you make a (subjective) judgment call, specify and justify your reasoning. "Just because" is not a good reason for an argument.

**Original thesis:** Socialism is the best form of government for Kenya.

**Revised thesis:** If the government takes over industry in Kenya, the industry will become more efficient.

Avoid merely reporting a fact. Say more than what is already proven fact. Go further with your ideas. Otherwise... why would your point matter?

**Original thesis:** Hoover's administration was rocked by scandal.

**Revised thesis:** The many scandals of Hoover's administration revealed basic problems with the Republican Party's nominating process.

Do not expect to come up with a fully formulated thesis statement before you have finished writing the paper. The thesis will inevitably change as you revise and develop your ideas—and that is ok! Start with a tentative thesis and revise as your paper develops.

**: Is your thesis statement original?**

Avoid, avoid, avoid generic arguments and formula statements. They work well to get a rough draft started, but will easily bore a reader. Keep revising until the thesis reflects your real ideas.

**Tip:** The point you make in the paper should matter:

: Be prepared to answer "So what?" about your thesis statement.

: Be prepared to explain why the point you are making is worthy of a paper. Why should the reader read it?

Compare the following:

**Original thesis:**

There are advantages and disadvantages to using statistics. (a fill-in-the-blank formula)

**Revised theses:**

: Careful manipulation of data allows a researcher to use statistics to support any claim she desires.

: In order to ensure accurate reporting, journalists must understand the real significance of the statistics they report.

: Because advertisers consciously and unconsciously manipulate data, every consumer should learn how to evaluate statistical claims.



Avoid formula and generic words. Search for concrete subjects and active verbs, revising as many "to be" verbs as possible. A few suggestions below show how specific word choice sharpens and clarifies your meaning.

**Original:** "Society is..." [who is this "society" and what exactly are they doing?]

**Revised:** "Men and women will learn how to...", "writers can generate...", "television addicts may chip away at...", "American educators must decide...", "taxpayers and legislators alike can help fix..."

**Original:** "the media"

**Revised:** "the new breed of television reporters," "advertisers," "hard-hitting print journalists," "horror flicks," "TV movies of the week," "sitcoms," "national public radio," "Top 40 bop-til-you-drop..."

**Original:** "is, are, was, to be" or "to do, to make"

**Revised:** any great action verb you can concoct: "to generate," "to demolish," "to batter," "to revolt," "to discover," "to flip," "to signify," "to endure..."

Use your own words in thesis statements; avoid quoting. Crafting an original, insightful, and memorable thesis makes a distinct impression on a reader. You will lose credibility as a writer if you become only a mouthpiece or a copyist; you will gain credibility by grabbing the reader with your own ideas and words.

A well-crafted thesis statement reflects well-crafted ideas. It signals a writer who has intelligence, commitment, and enthusiasm.

## 06

### ***How to Write a Fascinating Thesis Statement***

Writing, Essay Help, Study Help, Research, English Add comments

No professors or teaching assistants want to read a boring paper. They want to read a paper that engages them; a paper that is compelling and clearly articulated.

So how do you write one of these papers?

Well, the most important part of writing a fascinating paper is to develop a great thesis statement.

You see, your thesis statement is the spine for your entire paper. It's the glue that holds your



paper together. The more complex, specific, and interesting, the better your paper will be.

So here are some steps to breathe life into your next thesis statement:

### **Get Excited About Your Topic**

No matter what you have to write about, you should try and get excited about it. The more interest and excitement you put forth, the better your paper will be. Even if your paper topic bores you, this is your opportunity to get creative and think of a way to make it exciting. That's your challenge - and you can do it.

### **Develop A Strong Opinion About Your Topic**

Writing a great thesis statement means you need to develop a strong opinion about your topic. This is how radio talk show hosts keep their audiences - they spew strong opinions that attract listeners and phone calls. If you're not sure how to form a strong opinion about your topic, start reading through journal article abstracts. Check out Google Scholar and read through thesis statements pertaining to your topic. Jot down any strong opinions that look interesting to you.

### **Use Exciting Adjectives to Spice up Your Thesis**

Don't just say that something is good or bad, empower your nouns with exciting adjectives that describe what you really think. Adjectives like oppressive, tyrannical, and bloodthirsty are powerful because they portray a strong point of view about something or someone.

### **Focus Your Thesis On One Main Idea**

As mentioned in the introduction, your thesis is the glue for your paper. Make sure your thesis doesn't divert into different directions. Stay focused on one main theme to keep your paper organized and your reader on topic.

### **Get Extremely Specific in Your Thesis**

A generic thesis statement weakens a paper because the reader isn't clear exactly what you're going to be arguing about. However, if your thesis includes specific details about your argument, it will prepare the reader for what's ahead. It also helps you stay on task as you argue your points with specific examples.

### **Keep a List of Interesting Thesis Statements**

Just as copywriters have a swipe file of powerful headlines, you should develop your own list

of powerful thesis statements. Whenever you come across a thesis statement that intrigues you, add it to your list. The longer your list of thesis statements, the more ammunition you'll have when you need to craft your own.

Here are three examples of thesis statements to get you going:

**Weak Thesis:**

*The North and South fought the Civil War for many reasons, some of which were the same and some different.*

**Average Thesis:**

*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.*

**Strong Thesis:**

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

A thesis statement in an essay is a sentence that explicitly identifies the purpose of the paper or previews its main ideas.

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**A thesis statement is an assertion, not a statement of fact or an observation.**

- **Fact or observation:** People use many lawn chemicals.
- **Thesis:** People are poisoning the environment with chemicals merely to keep their lawns clean.

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**A thesis takes a stand rather than announcing a subject.**

- **Announcement:** The thesis of this paper is the difficulty of solving our environmental problems.
- **Thesis:** Solving our environmental problems is more difficult than many environmentalists believe.

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**A thesis is the main idea, not the title. It must be a complete sentence that explains in some detail what you expect to write about.**

- **Title:** Social Security and Old Age.
- **Thesis:** Continuing changes in the Social Security System makes it almost impossible to plan intelligently for one's retirement.

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**A thesis statement is narrow, rather than broad. If the thesis statement is sufficiently narrow, it can be fully supported.**

- **Broad:** The American steel industry has many problems.
- **Narrow:** The primary problem of the American steel industry is the lack of funds to renovate outdated plants and equipment.

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**A thesis statement is specific rather than vague or general.**

- **Vague:** Hemingway's war stories are very good.
- **Specific:** Hemingway's stories helped create a new prose style by employing extensive dialogue, shorter sentences, and strong Anglo-Saxon words.

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**A thesis statement has one main point rather than several main points. More than one point may be too difficult for the reader to understand and the writer to support.**

- **More than one main point:** Stephen Hawking's physical disability has not prevented him from becoming a world-renowned physicist, and his book is the subject of a movie.
- **One Main point:** Stephen Hawking's physical disability has not prevented him from becoming a world renowned physicist.


You can revise your thesis statement whenever you want to while you are writing your essay. Writers often discover what their real purpose and point is in the process of putting their thoughts into words and then reading what they've written.

# Thesis Statements: How to Write Them


> Resources > Writing > Academic > Thesis Statements


22 Sep 2006 modified by *Dennis G. Jerz*  
17 Oct 2000; originally written by *Nicci Jordan, UWEC Junior*

A thesis statement is the **single, specific claim** that your essay supports. A good thesis statement is not simply an observation, a question, or a promise. It includes a topic, a precise opinion, and reasoning.


-  Black Elk Speaks accurately represents Indian lifestyle through its attention to cultural detail, its use of Indian words, and its direct quotes from Black Elk.
- **Topic:** *The representation of Indian lifestyle in the book Black Elk Speaks*
  - **Precise Opinion:** *the book is accurate*
  - **Reasoning Blueprint:** *the book pays attention to cultural detail, it uses Indian words, and it uses direct quotations from Black Elk. The rest of the paper will establish the truth of each of these supporting points, and then explain why they add up to support the truth of the thesis statement.*

For a short paper (1-2 pages), the thesis statement is often the first sentence. A complex thesis statement for a long paper may be part of a thesis paragraph. But it's hard to go wrong if you put your thesis first.

 Is Black Elks Speaks an accurate representation of Indian lifestyle?  
*This is a question, not a statement. It's fine to sit down at the keyboard with the intention of writing a paper to answer this question, but before you start churning out the sentences, you should have a clear idea of what answer you're trying to support.*

 This paper will look at the book's attention to cultural detail, its use of Indian words, and its direct quotations from Black Elk, in order to determine whether Black Elk Speaks accurately represents Indian lifestyle.

*The above sample is slightly better because it offers more detail, but it still doesn't say whether the author plans to argue for or against the book's accuracy.*

-  Because the events in the story emphasize Black Elk's role as a Sioux Warrior, and do not describe Black Elk's eventual conversion to Catholicism and membership in the Society of St. Joseph, Black Elk Speaks presents a skewed and simplified view of the complex history of Native Americans.

*Note that the above sample contains a topic (the accuracy of Black Elk Speaks), opinion (it is skewed and simplified), and reasoning (it only tells part of the story). Those three parts don't have to come in that order.*

## Useful Formulae for Thesis Statements

If you're not sure whether you have a good thesis statement, see whether you can fit your ideas into one of these basic patterns.

- *[Something] [does something] because [reason(s)].*
- *Because [reason(s)], [something] [does something].*
- *Although **[opposing evidence]**, [reasons] show [Something] [does something].*

For longer papers, thesis statements can be very complex.

*While [a specific, named person] says [a direct quote or paraphrase from the source], [a different, named person] says [something else]. While the two authors disagree over [a minor point], they both share a deep concern over [the topic of your paper]. [Person one's] refusal to accept [a particular point made by person two] suggests that [person one] is [your thesis -- stating the real reason why person one won't agree with person two].*

## Parts of a Thesis Statement

The thesis statement has **3 main parts**: the **limited subject**, the **precise opinion**, and the **blueprint of reasons**.

### 1. Limited Subject

- ✓ ***Black Elk Speaks*** accurately represents Indian lifestyle through its attention to cultural detail, its use of Indian words, and its direct quotes from Black Elk.

The limited subject tells the reader exactly **on what, or whom the article focuses**. The book title (*Black Elk Speaks*), from the example, is the limited subject of the thesis statement:

- ✗ Biographies of all types can teach us many things about the past. What was the culture like? What was the language like? And what did the people say? One such book is Black Elk Speaks, which tells the story of a Sioux warrior in the late 1800s. How accurate is this book? This paper will investigate the cultural details, the language, and what Black Elk actually said, in order to determine the answer.

*The above sample starts off with a wordy, general statement about biographies. But the main topic isn't about biographies of all types, it's specifically about one book, Black Elk Speaks.*

### 2. Precise Opinion

The precise opinion gives your **answer to a question** about the subject. A good **precise opinion is vital** to the reader's comprehension of the **goal of the essay**.

✔ Black Elk Speaks **accurately represents** Indian lifestyle by its attention to cultural detail, its use of Indian words, and its direct quotes from Black Elk.

In order to demonstrate college-level thinking, your opinion should be non-obvious, and it should be possible for a reasonable person to disagree with you. There aren't many reasonable counter-arguments for claims like "Drug abuse is bad" or "The Nazi regime's execution of 6 million innocent Jews was horrible." That's because it's always wrong to "abuse" anything, and it's always wrong to execute the innocent.

✘ Does *Black Elk Speaks* accurately represent Indian lifestyle?

*A question is not an opinion. You may, of course, wish to argue that a particular question is unanswerable, or not even worth asking -- but that would still be an opinion that you would have to back up just like any other opinion.*

✔ Black Elk Speaks **fails to represent** Indian lifestyle by its lack of attention to cultural detail, its misunderstanding of Indian words, and its lack of quotes from Black Elk himself.

*This precise opinion also tells how the author feels, yet it is completely opposite from the original example. **Either is acceptable**, as long as the rest of the essay supports the opinion.*

### 3. Blueprint of Reasons

A blueprint is a plan. It lets the builder know that the foyer will be here, the living room will be to the east, the dining room to the west, and the family room will be north.

The blueprint of an essay permits you to see the whole shape of your ideas before you start churning out whole paragraphs.

While it's okay for you to start writing down your ideas before you have a clear sense of your blueprint, your reader should never encounter a list of details without being told exactly what point these details are supposed to support. (See: [Blueprinting](#).)

<p><u>Black Elk Speaks</u> accurately represents Indian lifestyle by <b>its attention to cultural detail, its use of Indian words, and its direct quotes from Black Elk</b>.</p>
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In the blueprint, the author **signals an intention to support the precise opinion**. The author of the example above introduces three different kinds of evidence:

- cultural details
- Indian words
- quotes from Black Elk.

Informed by this blueprint, the reader expects to encounter one section (a paragraph or more) devoted to each subtopic.

The **blueprint determines the shape of your paper.**

If your thesis statement introduces three reasons, the reader will expect a section on reason 1, a section on reason 2, and a section on reason 3. For a single paragraph, you might only spend one sentence on each reason. For a 2-3 page paper, each reason might get its own paragraph. For a 10-page paper, each reason might contain its own local thesis statement, with its own list of reasons, so that each section involves several paragraphs.

To emphasize the structure of your essay, **repeat keywords or paraphrased ideas from the blueprint** as you introduce the sections in which you expand on each point. Crafting good transitions is a skill that takes time and practice. (See [Transitions and Reminders of Thesis](#)).

**Note:** If you repeat your blueprint phrases and your thesis statement robotically ("The third point I want to talk about is how *Black Elk Speaks* accurately represents the Indian lifestyle through its direct quotes from Black Elk."), your writing will be rather dry and lifeless. **Dull writing is probably better than aimless rambling**, although neither is terribly effective. |

**Note:** A thesis statement amounts to nothing if the paper is not **completely focused on that main point**. Blueprinting helps create the coherency of the thesis throughout the entire essay, which makes it a necessary part of the thesis statement.

Now, let's play: Is it a thesis?

I would like to become a chef when I finish school

Although both chefs and cooks can prepare fine meals, chefs differ from cooks in education, professional commitment, and artistry.

---

I enjoy white water rafting.

A first water rafting experience can challenge the body and spirit and transform an adolescent into an adult

---

Men are chauvinists.

Our American family structure encourages men to repress their true feelings, leaving them open to physical, psychological, and relationship difficulties.

---

Steroid abuse



Steroids, even those legally available, are addictive and should be banned from sports.

---

Hip hop is the best thing that has happened to music in twenty years

Though many people dismiss hip hop as offensive, hip hop music offers urban youth an important opportunity for artistic expression, and allows them to articulate the poetry of the street.

---

Many people object to today's violent horror movies.

Despite their high-tech special effects, today's graphically violent horror movies do not convey the creative use of cinematography or the emotional impact that we saw in the classic horror films of the 1940s and 50s.

---

## Why Should Your Essay Contain A Thesis Statement?

- to test your ideas by distilling them into a sentence or two
- to better organize and develop your argument
- to provide your reader with a "guide" to your argument

In general, your thesis statement will accomplish these goals if you think of the thesis as the answer to the question your paper explores.

### ***A strong thesis takes some sort of stand.***

Remember that your thesis needs to show your conclusions about a subject. For example, if you are writing a paper for a class on fitness, you might be asked to choose a popular weight-loss product to evaluate. Here are two thesis statements:

*There are some negative and positive aspects to the Banana Herb Tea Supplement.*

This is a weak thesis. First, it fails to take a stand. Second, the phrase "negative and positive" aspects" are vague.

*Because Banana Herb Tea Supplement promotes rapid weight loss that results in the loss of muscle and lean body mass, it poses a potential danger to customers.*

This is a strong thesis because it takes a stand.

### ***2. A strong thesis justifies discussion.***

Your thesis should indicate the point of the discussion. If your assignment is to write a paper on kinship systems, using your own family as an example, you might come up with either of these two thesis statements:

*My family is an extended family.*

This is a weak thesis because it states an observation. Your reader won't be able to tell the point of the statement, and will probably stop reading.

*While most American families would view consanguineal marriage as a threat to the nuclear family structure, many Iranian families, like my own, believe that these marriages help reinforce kinship ties in an extended family.*

This is a strong thesis because it shows how your experience contradicts a widely accepted view. A good strategy for creating a strong thesis is to show that the topic is controversial. Readers will be interested in reading the rest of the essay to see how you support your point.

### **3. A strong thesis expresses one main idea.**

Readers need to be able to see that your paper has one main point. If your thesis expresses more than one idea, then you might confuse your readers about the subject of your paper. For example:

*Companies need to exploit the marketing potential of the Internet, and web pages can provide both advertising and customer support.*

This is a weak thesis statement because the reader can't decide whether the paper is about marketing on the Internet or web pages. To revise the thesis, the relationship between the two ideas needs to become clearer. One way to revise the thesis would be to write:

*Because the Internet is filled with tremendous marketing potential, companies should exploit this potential by using web pages that offer both advertising and customer support.*

This is a strong thesis because it shows that the two ideas are related. Hint: a great many clear and engaging thesis statements contain words like "because," "since," "so," "although," "unless," and "however."

### **4. A strong thesis statement is specific.**

A thesis statement should show exactly what your paper will be about, and will help you keep your paper to a manageable topic. For example, if you write a paper on hunger, you might say:

*World hunger has many causes and effects.*

This is a weak thesis statement for two major reasons. First, "world hunger" can't be discussed thoroughly in five or ten pages. Second, "many causes and effects" is vague. You should be able to identify specific causes and effects. A revised thesis might look like this:

*Hunger persists in Appalachia because jobs are scarce and farming in the infertile soil is rarely profitable.*

This is a strong thesis because it narrows the subject to a more specific and manageable topic and it also identifies the specific causes for the existence of hunger.

## ***What is a Working Thesis Sentence?***

Let's take a minute to define this term.

A thesis sentence, as we've said, is a kind of contract between you and your reader. It asserts, controls, and structures your argument for your reader's ease. A working thesis sentence, on the other hand, is a sentence that you compose in order to make the work of writing easier. It's a sentence that asserts, controls, and structures the argument for you.

The working thesis need not be eloquent. In fact, it can be quite clunky, declaring your argument and then clumsily listing your supporting points. Not to worry: you'll be revising your thesis, and often more than once.

Remember that, as you write, you are bound to come up with new ideas and observations that you'd like to incorporate into your paper. Every time you make a new discovery, your thesis sentence will have to be revised. Sometimes you'll find that you're stuck in your writing. You may need to return to your thesis. Perhaps you haven't clearly defined an important term or condition in your thesis? Maybe that's why you find yourself unable to progress beyond a certain point in your argument?

Revising your working thesis at this juncture could help you to clarify for yourself the direction of your argument. Don't be afraid to revise! In fact, the most important quality of a working thesis sentence is its flexibility. A working thesis needs to keep up with your thinking. It needs to accommodate what you learn as you go along.

### **Revising the Working Thesis**

Let's return now to our in-progress thesis: "In X's novel, the characters' seemingly insignificant use of lipstick in fact points to one of the novel's larger themes: the masking and unmasking of the self." Perhaps this thesis served you well as you were writing the first couple of pages of your paper, but now that you are into the meat of the matter, you are stuck. How, *exactly*, is the writer using lipstick and masks to reveal character? *And what, precisely, is his point in doing so?*

It's at this juncture that you'll probably return to your thesis and discover a) what it doesn't say, and b) what it needs to say. We've already determined that the sentence doesn't really address the most arguable - and interesting - aspect of this argument. Now it's time to ask yourself why this hasn't been addressed. Perhaps

you, the writer, haven't yet articulated this part of the argument for yourself? Is this why the thesis (and with it, the paper) seems to trail off?

At this point you should stop drafting the paper and return to the text. Read a bit. Brainstorm a bit. Write another discovery draft. Read a bit more. Ohmygosh! Here is something interesting. You've found a passage in which the writer talks about how the lipstick left behind on a lover's shirt "drew a map for his wife into the dark lands of his infidelities." And you've found another passage in which the jilted lover's bright orange lipstick was "like a road sign, guiding her betrayer to the heart of her pain." In these two passages you see the writer addressing another function of lipstick: that women use it to draw a kind of map. You look for other lipstick examples that might shed more light on the idea of mapping, and you find them. Even better, you discover that all of these examples have something to do with betrayal, guilt, and shame.

In the end, you conclude that lipstick is not being used in this novel just to mask and unmask. Women also use lipstick to *map*. The two are in fact linked:

1. Lipstick masks by concealing real feelings (most often feelings of betrayal, guilt, and shame).
2. Lipstick masks, but in the process reveals or creates a new persona, one who overcomes the feelings of betrayal, guilt, and shame.
3. The author also uses the act of putting on lipstick as a metaphor for mapping. These maps might conceal - that is, they might serve to detour the observer from discovering (or arriving at) the woman's feelings of betrayal, or
4. They might reveal. First, lipstick might draw a map to the truth about a betrayal, as they do for the betrayed wife in the novel. And second, lipstick might be seen as a tool with which a woman maps herself, drawing new borders, re-imagining her own inner landscapes, and re-routing her own destiny.

This idea is very complicated. How do you make a thesis out of this?

Your first try is bound to be clumsy. You need to find a way of putting together all of your important ideas - lipsticks, masks, maps, concealing, revealing, betrayal - into one sentence. Can it be done?

Maybe; maybe not. Let's try:

*While lipstick is used in X's novel to conceal feelings of betrayal, it is also used to reveal the betrayal itself, in that lipstick both masks and maps betrayal, at first allowing women to hide themselves, but later providing them with the possibility to create new selves, and to re-route their lives.*

Does this sentence work?

### **Revising Your Thesis For Eloquence**

Clearly not.

For one thing, it is simply too long. You are putting too much information into one sentence. Sometimes writers fail to understand that their argument might best be expressed in a couple of sentences (with one sentence providing background information and the second serving as the thesis). Note the difference such a change would make:

*While lipstick is used in X's novel to conceal feelings of betrayal, it is also used to reveal the betrayal itself. Accordingly, lipstick both masks and maps betrayal in this novel, initially allowing women to hide themselves, but later providing them with the possibility to create new selves, and to re-route their lives.*

Better? Sure, but it could be better still. You will, of course, want to play with your thesis sentence until it is strong enough to present your complex argument, and clear enough to guide your reader through your paper. But even more than this, you will want to write a thesis sentence that evokes something in the reader. You will want to use language that has some power; you will want to structure the sentence so that it has some "oomph." Pay attention to diction, to syntax, to nuance, and to tone. In short, *write a good sentence*.

Understand that you can revise the thesis sentence above in a number of ways. Ask yourself:

- Is my argument clear?
- Does it present the logic and the structure of my paper?
- Does it emphasize the points I want to emphasize?

Perhaps in the end you decide that the previous sentence seems to make masking and mapping of equal importance to this paper. You've decided that mapping is the more original, stronger idea. So you revise once more, for emphasis. Consider this, then, our final thesis sentence (note how the complete argument now relies on the interaction between two introductory sentences and the thesis statement itself):

*While at first it might appear that lipstick is being used merely to hide the characters' feelings of betrayal, a closer look reveals that its most essential use is actually to **map** the path to the betrayal itself. By using lipstick as the signposts, betrayal can be discovered and navigated. As a result, characters are able to re-draw the borders of their relationships, and to re-route the course of their lives.*

## **The Thesis Statement**

This is not an exhaustive list of bad thesis statements, but here're five kinds of problems I've seen most often. Notice that the last two, #4 and #5, are not necessarily incorrect or illegitimate thesis statements, but, rather, inappropriate for the purposes of this course. They may be useful forms for papers on different topics in other courses.

### **1. The non-thesis thesis.**

A thesis takes a position on an issue. It is different from a topic sentence in that a thesis statement is not neutral. 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.

**Bad Thesis 1:** In his article Stanley Fish shows that we don't really have the right to free speech.

**Bad Thesis 2:** This paper will consider the advantages and disadvantages of certain restrictions on free speech.

**Better Thesis 1:** Stanley Fish's argument that free speech exists more as a political prize than as a legal reality ignores the fact that even as a political prize it still serves the social end of creating a general cultural atmosphere of tolerance that may ultimately promote free speech in our nation just as effectively as any binding law.

**Better Thesis 2:** Even though there may be considerable advantages to restricting hate speech, the possibility of chilling open dialogue on crucial racial issues is too great and too high a price to pay.

### **2. The overly broad thesis.**

A thesis should be as specific as possible, and it should be tailored to reflect the scope of the paper. It is not possible, for instance, to write about the history of English literature in a 5 page paper. In addition to choosing simply a smaller topic, strategies to narrow a thesis include specifying a method or perspective or delineating certain limits.

**Bad Thesis 1:** There should be no restrictions on the 1st amendment.

**Bad Thesis 2:** The government has the right to limit free speech.

**Better Thesis 1:** There should be no restrictions on the 1st amendment if those restrictions are intended merely to protect individuals from unspecified or otherwise unquantifiable or unverifiable "emotional distress."

**Better Thesis 2:** The government has the right to limit free speech in cases of overtly racist or sexist language because our failure to address such abuses would effectively suggest that our society condones such ignorant and hateful views.

### 3. The incontestable thesis.

A thesis must be arguable. And 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 tautological or so universally accepted that there is no need to prove the point.

**Bad Thesis 1:** Although we have the right to say what we want, we should avoid hurting other people's feelings.

**Bad Thesis 2:** There are always alternatives to using racist speech.

**Better Thesis 1:** If we can accept that emotional injuries can be just as painful as physical ones we should limit speech that may hurt people's feelings in ways similar to the way we limit speech that may lead directly to bodily harm.

**Better Thesis 2:** The "fighting words" exception to free speech is not legitimate because it wrongly considers speech as an action.

### 4. The "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 1:** There are many reasons we need to limit hate speech.

**Bad Thesis 2:** None of the arguments in favor of regulating pornography are persuasive.

**Better Thesis 1:** Among the many reasons we need to limit hate speech the most compelling ones all refer to our history of discrimination and prejudice, and it is, ultimately, for the purpose of trying to repair our troubled racial society that we need hate speech legislation.

**Better Thesis 2:** None of the arguments in favor of regulating pornography are persuasive because they all base their points on the unverifiable and questionable assumption that the producers of pornography necessarily harbor ill will specifically to women.

### 5. The research paper thesis.

In an other course this would not be at all unacceptable, and, in fact, possibly even desirable. But in this kind of course, a thesis statement that makes a factual claim that can be verified only with scientific, sociological, psychological or other kind of experimental evidence is not appropriate. You need to construct a thesis that you are prepared to prove using the tools you have available, without having to consult the world's leading expert on the issue to provide you with a definitive judgment.

**Bad Thesis 1:** Americans today are not prepared to give up on the concept of free speech.

**Bad Thesis 2:** Hate speech can cause emotional pain and suffering in victims just as intense as physical battery.

**Better Thesis 1:** Whether or not the cultural concept of free speech bears any relation to the reality of 1st amendment legislation and jurisprudence, its continuing social function as a promoter of tolerance and intellectual exchange trumps the call for politicization (according to Fish's agenda) of the term.

**Better Thesis 2:** The various arguments against the regulation of hate speech depend on the unspoken and unexamined assumption that emotional pain is either trivial.

<b>Chronology:</b>	Gallaudet has changed dramatically since 1986 when Gallaudet College became Gallaudet University.
<b>Procedure:</b>	Educational placement for deaf children in the U.S. follows a five-step screening process.
<b>Cause:</b>	Many children became deaf in the 1960s because of an outbreak of Rubella.
<b>Effect:</b>	As a result of the Rubella outbreak, schools for the deaf had to expand to accommodate new students.
<b>Problem:</b>	Many educators of deaf children believe that Alexander Graham Bell's philosophy of oralism prevented deaf children from having easy access to learning.
<b>Solution:</b>	Recent research in deaf education shows that deaf children can get easy access to learning if their teachers communicate in American Sign Language.
<b>Comparison:</b>	Deaf people raised using American Sign Language seem to be more successful than deaf people raised orally.
<b>Contrast:</b>	Deaf children who use American Sign Language from birth are different from deaf children who learned Sign Language as adults.
<b>Similarity:</b>	American Sign Language is similar to French Sign Language because many ASL signs originated from LSF.
<b>Difference:</b>	The quality of deaf education varies from country to country.
<b>Relationship:</b>	American education of deaf children was influenced by the French.
<b>Analysis:</b>	I. King Jordan raised three important issues during his recent speech.
<b>Pro:</b>	Some hearing parents of deaf children support cochlear implants because they believe implants help deaf children communicate.
<b>Con:</b>	Many members of the deaf community oppose putting cochlear implants in deaf babies.
<b>Advantages:</b>	Deaf people think they are lucky to be deaf because they are members of a close-knit community.
<b>Disadvantages:</b>	Deaf people think it's difficult to be deaf because communication technology is often not accessible for deaf people as fast as it is for hearing people.



## How to Tell a Strong Thesis Sentence from a Weak One.

### 1. A strong thesis takes some sort of stand.

Remember that your thesis needs to show your conclusions about a subject. For example, if you are planning a presentation for a class on fitness, you might be asked to choose a popular weight-loss product to evaluate. Here are two thesis statements:

**There are some negative and positive aspects to the Banana Herb Tea Supplement.**

This is a weak thesis. First, it fails to take a stand. Second, the phrase "negative and positive" aspects" are vague.

**Because Banana Herb Tea Supplement promotes rapid weight loss that results in the loss of muscle and lean body mass, it poses a potential danger to customers.**

This is a strong thesis because it takes a stand.

### 2. A strong thesis justifies discussion.

Your thesis should indicate the point of the discussion. If your assignment is to give a presentation on kinship systems, using your own family as an example, you might come up with either of these two thesis statements:

**My family is an extended family.**

This is a weak thesis because it states an observation. Your listener won't be able to tell the point of the statement, and will probably stop reading.

**While most American families would view consanguineal marriage as a threat to the nuclear family structure, many Iranian families, like my own, believe that these marriages help reinforce kinship ties in an extended family.**

This is a strong thesis because it shows how your experience contradicts a widely-accepted view. A good strategy for creating a strong thesis is to show that the topic is controversial. Listeners will be interested in paying attention to the rest of the presentation to see how you support your point.

### 3. A strong thesis expresses one main idea.

Listeners need to be able to see that your presentation has one main point. If your thesis expresses more than one idea, then you might confuse your listeners about the subject of your presentation. For example:

**Companies need to exploit the marketing potential of the Internet, and web pages can provide both advertising and customer support.**

This is a weak thesis statement because the listener can't decide whether the presentation is about marketing on the Internet or web pages. To revise the thesis, the relationship between the two ideas needs to become more clear. One way to revise the thesis would be to write:

**Because the Internet is filled with tremendous marketing potential, companies should exploit this potential by using web pages that offer both advertising and customer support.**

This is a strong thesis because it shows that the two ideas are related. Hint: a great many clear and engaging thesis statements contain words like "because," "since," "so," "although," "unless," and "however."

**4. A strong thesis statement is specific.**

A thesis statement should show exactly what your presentation will be about, and will help you keep your presentation to a manageable topic. For example, if you write a presentation on hunger, you might say:

**World hunger has many causes and effects.**

This is a weak thesis statement for two major reasons. First, "world hunger" can't be properly covered in ten or fifteen minutes. Second, "many causes and effects" is vague. You should be able to identify specific causes and effects. A revised thesis might look like this:

**Hunger persists in Morocco because jobs are scarce and farming in the infertile soil is rarely profitable.**

This is a strong thesis because it narrows the subject to a more specific and manageable topic and it also identifies the specific causes/ reasons for the existence of hunger.