How To Write a Thesis Statement

What is a Thesis Statement?

Almost all of us—even if we don't do it consciously—look early in an essay for a one- or two-sentence condensation of the argument or analysis that is to follow. We refer to that condensation as a thesis statement.

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.

How to Generate a Thesis Statement if the Topic is Assigned

Almost all assignments, no matter how complicated, can be reduced to a single question. Your first step, then, is to distill the assignment into a specific question. For example, if your assignment is, "Write a report to the local school board explaining the potential benefits of using computers in a fourth-grade class," turn the request into a question like, "What are the potential benefits of using computers in a fourth-grade class?" After you've chosen the question your essay will answer, compose one or two complete sentences answering that question.

Q: "What are the potential benefits of using computers in a fourth-grade class?"

A: "The potential benefits of using computers in a fourth-grade class are . . ."

OR

A: "Using computers in a fourth-grade class promises to improve . . ."

The answer to the question is the thesis statement for the essay.

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
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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—a fact--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.

Paragraphs and Topic Sentences

A paragraph is a series of sentences that are organized and coherent, and are all related to a single topic. Almost every piece of writing you do that is longer than a few sentences should be organized into paragraphs. This is because paragraphs show a reader where the subdivisions of an essay begin and end, and thus help the reader see the organization of the essay and grasp its main points.

Paragraphs can contain many different kinds of information. A paragraph could contain a series of brief examples or a single long illustration of a general point. It might describe a place, character, or process; narrate a series of events; compare or contrast two or more things; classify items into categories; or describe causes and effects. Regardless of

the kind of information they contain, all paragraphs share certain characteristics. One of the most important of these is a topic sentence.

TOPIC SENTENCES

A well-organized paragraph supports or develops a single controlling idea, which is expressed in a sentence called the topic sentence. A topic sentence has several important functions: it substantiates or supports an essay's thesis statement; it unifies the content of a paragraph and directs the order of the sentences; and it advises the reader of the subject to be discussed and how the paragraph will discuss it. Readers generally look to the first few sentences in a paragraph to determine the subject and perspective of the paragraph. That's why it's often best to put the topic sentence at the very beginning of the paragraph. In some cases, however, it's more effective to place another sentence before the topic sentence—for example, a sentence linking the current paragraph to the previous one, or one providing background information.

Although most paragraphs should have a topic sentence, there are a few situations when a paragraph might not need a topic sentence. For example, you might be able to omit a topic sentence in a paragraph that narrates a series of events, if a paragraph continues developing an idea that you introduced (with a topic sentence) in the previous paragraph, or if all the sentences and details in a paragraph clearly refer—perhaps indirectly—to a main point. The vast majority of your paragraphs, however, should have a topic sentence.

PARAGRAPH STRUCTURE

Most paragraphs in an essay have a three-part structure—introduction, body, and conclusion. You can see this structure in paragraphs whether they are narrating, describing, comparing, contrasting, or analyzing information. Each part of the paragraph plays an important role in communicating your meaning to your reader.

Introduction: the first section of a paragraph; should include the topic sentence and any other sentences at the beginning of the paragraph that give background information or provide a transition.

Body: follows the introduction; discusses the controlling idea, using facts, arguments, analysis, examples, and other information.

Conclusion: the final section; summarizes the connections between the information discussed in the body of the paragraph and the paragraph's controlling idea.

The following paragraph illustrates this pattern of organization. In this paragraph the topic sentence and concluding sentence (CAPITALIZED) both help the reader keep the paragraph's main point in mind.

SCIENTISTS HAVE LEARNED TO SUPPLEMENT THE SENSE OF SIGHT IN NUMEROUS WAYS. In front of the tiny pupil of the eye ***they put****, on Mount Palomar, a great monocle 200 inches in diameter, and with it see 2000 times farther into the depths of space.* ***Or they look*** *through a small pair of lenses arranged as a microscope into a drop of water or blood, and magnify by as much as 2000 diameters the living creatures there, many of which are among man's most dangerous enemies.* ***Or****, if we want to see distant happenings on earth,* ***they use*** *some of the previously wasted electromagnetic waves to carry television images which they re-create as light by whipping tiny crystals on a screen with electrons in a vacuum.* ***Or they can bring*** *happenings of long ago and far away as colored motion pictures, by arranging silver atoms and color-absorbing molecules to force light waves into the patterns of original reality.* ***Or*** *if we want to see into the center of a steel casting or the chest of an injured child,* ***they send*** *the information on a beam of penetrating short-wave X rays, and then convert it back into images we can see on a screen or photograph. THUS ALMOST EVERY TYPE OF ELECTROMAGNETIC RADIATION YET DISCOVERED HAS BEEN USED TO EXTEND OUR SENSE OF SIGHT IN SOME WAY.* George Harrison, *"Faith and the Scientist"*

COHERENCE

In a coherent paragraph, each sentence relates clearly to the topic sentence or controlling idea, but there is more to coherence than this. If a paragraph is coherent, each sentence flows smoothly into the next without obvious shifts or jumps. A coherent paragraph also highlights the ties between old information and new information to make the structure of ideas or arguments clear to the reader.

Along with the smooth flow of sentences, a paragraph's coherence may also be related to its length. If you have written a very long paragraph, one that fills a double-spaced typed page, for example, you should check it carefully to see if it should start a new paragraph where the original paragraph wanders from its controlling idea. On the other hand, if a paragraph is very short (only one or two sentences, perhaps), you may need to develop its controlling idea more

thoroughly, or combine it with another paragraph.

A number of other techniques that you can use to establish coherence in paragraphs are described below.

Repeat key words or phrases. Particularly in paragraphs in which you define or identify an important idea or theory, be consistent in how you refer to it. This consistency and repetition will bind the paragraph together and help your reader understand your definition or description.

Create parallel structures. Parallel structures are created by constructing two or more phrases or sentences that have the same grammatical structure and use the same parts of speech. By creating parallel structures you make your sentences clearer and easier to read. In addition, repeating a pattern in a series of consecutive sentences helps your reader see the connections between ideas. In the paragraph above about scientists and the sense of sight, several sentences in the body of the paragraph have been constructed in a parallel way. The parallel structures (which have been **emphasized**) help the reader see that the paragraph is organized as a set of examples of a general statement.

Be consistent in point of view, verb tense, and number. Consistency in point of view, verb tense, and number is a subtle but important aspect of coherence. If you shift from the more personal "you" to the impersonal “one,” from past to present tense, or from “a man” to “they,” for example, you make your paragraph less coherent. Such inconsistencies can also confuse your reader and make your argument more difficult to follow.

Use transition words or phrases between sentences and between paragraphs. Transitional expressions emphasize the relationships between ideas, so they help readers follow your train of thought or see connections that they might otherwise miss or misunderstand. The following paragraph shows how carefully chosen transitions (CAPITALIZED) lead the reader smoothly from the introduction to the conclusion of the paragraph.

I don’t wish to deny that the flattened, minuscule head of the large-bodied "stegosaurus" houses little brain from our subjective, top-heavy perspective, ***BUT*** *I do wish to assert that we should not expect more of the beast.* ***FIRST OF ALL****, large animals have relatively smaller brains than related, small animals. The correlation of brain size with body size among kindred animals (all reptiles, all mammals,* ***FOR EXAMPLE****) is remarkably regular.* ***AS*** *we move from small to large animals, from mice to elephants or small lizards to Komodo dragons, brain size increases,* ***BUT*** *not so fast as body size.* ***IN OTHER WORDS****, bodies grow faster than brains,* ***AND*** *large animals have low ratios of brain weight to body weight.* ***IN FACT****, brains grow only about two-thirds as fast as bodies.* ***SINCE*** *we have no reason to believe that large animals are consistently stupider than their smaller relatives, we must conclude that large animals require relatively less brain to do as well as smaller animals.* ***IF*** *we do not recognize this relationship, we are likely to underestimate the mental power of very large animals, dinosaurs in particular.*

Stephen Jay Gould, “Were Dinosaurs Dumb?”

SOME USEFUL TRANSITIONS

(modified from Diana Hacker, *A Writer’s Reference*)

To show addition:
again, and, also, besides, equally important, first (second, etc.), further, furthermore, in addition, in the first place, moreover, next, too
To give examples:
for example, for instance, in fact, specifically, that is, to illustrate
To compare:
also, in the same manner, likewise, similarly
To contrast:
although, and yet, at the same time, but, despite, even though, however, in contrast, in spite of, nevertheless, on the contrary, on the other hand, still, though, yet
To summarize or conclude:
all in all, in conclusion, in other words, in short, in summary, on the whole, that is, therefore, to sum up
To show time:
after, afterward, as, as long as, as soon as, at last, before, during, earlier, finally, formerly, immediately, later, meanwhile, next, since, shortly, subsequently, then, thereafter, until, when, while
To show place or direction:
above, below, beyond, close, elsewhere, farther on, here, nearby, opposite, to the left (north, etc.)
To indicate logical relationship:
accordingly, as a result, because, consequently, for this reason, hence, if, otherwise, since, so, then, therefore, thus