

Thesis Statements

Introduction

Writing in college often takes the form of persuasion, i.e. convincing others that you have an interesting, logical point of view on the subject you are studying. Persuasion is a skill you practice regularly in your daily life. You persuade your roommate to clean up, your parents to let you borrow the car, your friend to vote for your favorite candidate or policy. In college, course assignments often ask you to make a persuasive case in writing. You are asked to convince your reader of your point of view. This form of persuasion, often called academic argument, follows a predictable pattern in writing. After a brief introduction of your topic, you state your point of view on the topic directly and often in one sentence. This sentence is the thesis statement and it serves as a summary of the argument you'll make in the rest of your paper.

What is a thesis statement?

A thesis statement:

- tells the reader how you will interpret the significance of the subject matter under discussion.
- is a road map for the paper; in other words, it tells the reader what to expect from the rest of the paper.
- directly answers the question asked of you. A thesis is an interpretation of a question or 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.
- is usually a single sentence somewhere in your first paragraph that presents your argument to the reader. The rest of the paper, the body of the essay, gathers and organizes evidence that will persuade the reader of the logic of your interpretation.

How do I get a thesis?

A thesis is the result of a lengthy thinking process. Formulating a thesis is not the first thing you do after reading an essay assignment. Before you develop an argument on any topic, you have to collect and organize evidence, look for possible relationships between known facts (such as surprising contrasts or similarities), and think about the significance of these relationships. Once you do this thinking, you will probably have a "working thesis," a basic or main idea, an argument that you think you can support with evidence but that may need adjustment along the way.

How do I know if my thesis is strong?

Ask yourself the following:

- *Do I answer the question?* Re-reading the question prompt after constructing a working thesis can help you fix an argument that misses the focus of the question.
- *Have I taken a position that others might challenge or oppose?* Thesis statements that are too vague often do not have a strong argument. If your thesis contains words like "good" or "successful," see if you could be more specific: Why is something "good"; What makes something "successful"?
- *Does my thesis pass the 'So What?' test?* 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?* If your thesis and the body of your essay do not seem to go together, one of them has to change. Remember, always reassess and revise your writing as necessary.
- *Does my thesis pass the how or why test?* If a reader's first response is "how? or why?" your thesis may be too open-ended and lack guidance for the reader. See what you can add to give the reader a better take on your position right from the beginning.

A Sampling of Theses

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

- Can this position be challenged? Explain.

- Does it pass the 'So What?' Test? Explain.

- Does it pass the How or Why Test? Explain.

2. *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.*

- Can this position be challenged? Explain.

- Does it pass the 'So What?' Test? Explain.

- Does it pass the How or Why Test? Explain.

3. *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.*

- Can this position be challenged? Explain.

- Does it pass the 'So What?' Test? Explain.

- Does it pass the How or Why Test? Explain.

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

- Can this position be challenged? Explain.

- Does it pass the 'So What?' Test? Explain.

- Does it pass the How or Why Test? Explain.

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

- Can this position be challenged? Explain.

- Does it pass the 'So What?' Test? Explain.

- Does it pass the How or Why Test? Explain.

6. *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 return to nature.*

- Can this position be challenged? Explain.

- Does it pass the 'So What?' Test? Explain.

- Does it pass the How or Why Test? Explain.
