

What Constitutes a Thesis

The following handouts come from Geoff Turner, who uses the first two in Psych 236 to teach his students what is and isn't a thesis statement for a paper in his course. He says, "I usually set this up with the example of how people learn most things (like what a car is) via induction and feedback rather than by definitions. Think of a toddler - you don't get out a dictionary to explain what a car is - you point. The kid points at a bus and says 'car,' but you say 'no, that's a bus.' And then you point to another car and say 'car.' These handouts try to do the same with theses."

The first handout is the preparatory step: Geoff gives students some examples on non-psychological topics and points out why they are or are not good thesis statements. (The principles he articulates are applicable across the curriculum.)

The next is a list of 23 sentences that Geoff collected from his students by asking them to send him their thesis statements. In class, he asks the students to weigh in on whether each is a thesis, and if it is one, on how good a thesis statement it is. To quote Geoff, "The coolest part of this is that there's rarely consensus at the beginning of the exercise, but there almost always is by the end. This year's class did well from the beginning - I assume it's because writing is being taught more across the curriculum."

The third handout shows sample theses from more advanced students in Psych 335, with Geoff's evaluation of them.

Thesis Statements

A thesis statement sets the direction for a rhetorical paper – it tells the reader what point you are trying to make. The thesis statement is the argument that you attempt to prove, the statement that you support with evidence. Several theses are listed below. Your job is to rank the thesis statements according to the following scale.

0 – Not a thesis statement at all.

1 – A thesis statement, but not a good one.

2 – A good thesis statement.

Examples:

0 1. I prefer chocolate ice cream to strawberry ice cream.

0 2. My friend's dating habits are very interesting.

1 3. There are nine planets in our solar system.

1 4. Most teenagers are happy with their parents.

2 5. Hoover's laissez-faire economic policies doomed the U.S. economy to a nearly decade-long depression.

The first two statements are opinions, and therefore non-provable. You can't argue about whether I prefer chocolate ice cream. I do. Period.

The third is a thesis, but it's a bad one because it's trivial, while the fourth isn't so good because it's too general or grand to be proven by you. Note that it isn't that no one can prove the fourth statement; it just isn't likely that you will in a three page paper for this class.

The last is not only a thesis, but it's a good one insofar as it can be supported by evidence.

Theses

Please rate the following theses as 0 (not a thesis), 1 (a thesis, but not a good one), or 2 (a good thesis). Use any number from 0 to 2 as you see fit (e.g., you might rate a thesis as a 1.7).

- _____ 1. Adolescents typically learn the way they are supposed to act from the media and from their friends.
- _____ 2. Timing and tempo can cause very distinct differences in the lives of early maturing versus late maturing adolescents.
- _____ 3. The implementation of more rituals that enhance the benefits of adulthood and the positive change that happens could greatly increase an adolescent's appreciation of themselves.
- _____ 4. Jen's decision represents an example of risky behavior caused by adolescent thinking.
- _____ 5. Beginning these changes noticeably early (or late) can both have a lasting effect on an adolescent by making them feel different from the norm, putting them in situations they aren't ready for or excluding them from situations they are.
- _____ 6. In this essay, I am going to discuss how my adolescent life –in biological, psychological, and social ways- was in regard to the things I have learned in the class.
- _____ 7. Personally I do not believe that I have fully transitioned from an adolescent into an adult, so therefore my experience is lacking in clarity but I believe it has been continuous.
- _____ 8. Witnessing Candice's quest for adulthood, I have realized the urgency for clarity and continuity in the journey of our youth.
- _____ 9. However, the experience of my brother was not typical, because unlike most boys, he lost many of the characteristics of a late maturer after puberty.
- _____ 10. I found this type of informal rites of passage to be present in my own adolescence.
- _____ 11. I found that my experiences during puberty were consistent with many of the ones we discussed in class and that I read about in the text.
- _____ 12. I've had a different experience than most of my peers in finding that rite of passage.

- _____ 13. There are so many contradictory messages being sent to adolescents as to how they are supposed to act that they are unsure of where they stand in American society.
- _____ 14. As a late-maturing girl, I fit the cultural and social ideal of the tall, slim, woman, however, I was so concerned that other people were watching me that I found having the ideal body type challenging because I felt that everyone was judging me.
- _____ 15. By definition I was experiencing a cognitive transition through a personal fable and imaginary audience and an ability to think in abstract and hypothetical ways.
- _____ 16. During adolescence, there are biological, cognitive, and social changes that occur and these in combination with her life experiences influenced Jenny's behavior.
- _____ 17. Unfortunately, I quickly discovered that school did not give me the opportunity to develop and express my ability to think creatively.
- _____ 18. My experience is consistent with most of the research, though I would not describe my eating habits as disordered.
- _____ 19. Until that time comes, I will remain stuck between adolescence and adulthood.
- _____ 20. The early onset of puberty in females has a strong positive correlation to self destructive feelings and behavior as shown in the Cultural Desirability Hypothesis, Developmental Readiness Hypothesis and the Deviance Hypothesis.
- _____ 21. According to the Disordered Eating Study, her early maturation could have been a factor in causing her illness.
- _____ 22. Adults, on the other hand, are less likely to be influenced to do something because "everyone else is doing it."
- _____ 23. Undoubetly, if our culture remains as focused on beauty and an "ideal shape" as it is now, our maturing girls, who are so impressionable and culnerable to societal norms, will be more apt to be affected by the negative impacts of early puberty.

Theses

Not a thesis (for this course)

Psychologists have long been interested in attachment.

A thesis, but not a very compelling one

There are major differences in how research studies have viewed the relation between temperament and attachment.

A good thesis

Although experimental research indicates that there is no relation between social skills and peer status, observational and survey studies consistently find that good social skills predict high levels of peer acceptance.

A very good thesis

Naturalistic observations, because they capture uncontaminated behaviors, show that maternal responsiveness is the primary determinant of attachment even though laboratory procedures and questionnaires suggest that the two are only weakly associated.