**Theses & Thesis Statements**

**What is a thesis?**

Simply put, the thesis is the main idea of an essay. And a thesis statement is that idea captured in a sentence or two. Any careful reader of an essay is expecting to find a clear, strong thesis statement in the introduction of the essay, usually at the end of the introduction, and to see it developed in the body. Because it is the main idea of an essay, writing a strong thesis statement is very important to writing a successful essay. It helps readers in the following ways:

i) It *narrows* your broader topic to a single idea

ii) It *asserts* something about your topic, conveying your *purpose* for writing and your *opinion* of the topic

iii) It *may* introduce the main points of your body, preparing the reader for the what will come in the body

**How to generate a thesis statement if the topic is a*ssigned*:**

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. So, now you must *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. So, now you must **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. So, now you must **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. So now you must **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. So now you must, **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 start thinking about your essay, you may not have a specific question in mind, but as you become more involved in the topic, your ideas become more specific. Expect your thesis to change throughout the writing process to reflect your new insights.

**Exercise: Improving a weak thesis statement:**

The most common problems of weak thesis statements are they:

1) make no claim

2) are obviously true or a statement of fact

3) restate conventional wisdom

4) offer personal conviction as the basis for the claim

5) make an overly broad claim.

**Consider the following five weak thesis statements and do your best to improve them.**

WEAK THESIS #1 – The thesis that makes no claim

Example: *I’m going to write about Darwin’s concerns with evolution in The Origin of Species.*

Solution: Raise specific issues for the essay to explore. Write a stronger thesis below:

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WEAK THESIS #2 – Obviously true or statement of fact

Example: *The jean industry targets its advertisements to appeal to young adults.*

Solution: Find some avenue of inquiry—a question about the facts or an issue raised by them. Make an assertion with which it would be possible for readers to disagree. Write a stronger thesis below:

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WEAK THESIS #3 – Restates conventional wisdom

Example: *An important part of one’s college education is learning to better understand others’ points of view.*

Solution: seek to complicate—see more than one point of view on—your subject. Avoid conventional wisdom unless you can qualify it or introduce a new perspective on it. Write a stronger thesis below:

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WEAK THESIS #4 – Offers personal conviction as the basis for the claim.

Example: *Any individual, if he looks deeply enough into his soul, knows what is right and what is wrong. The environment should be protected because it is the right thing to do, not because someone is forcing you to do it.*

Solution: Try on other points of view honestly and dispassionately; treat your ideas as hypotheses to be tested rather than as obvious truths. In the following examples, the opinions have been replaced with ideas—theories about the meaning and significance of their subjects that could be supported with evidence. Write a stronger thesis below:

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WEAK THESIS #5 – makes overly broad claim

Example: a) Violent revolutions have had both positive and negative results.

Solution: Convert broad categories and generic (fits anything) claims to more specific assertions; find ways to bring out the complexity of your subject. Write a stronger thesis below:

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*(From:* [*http://www.indiana.edu/~wts/pamphlets/thesis\_statement.shtml*](http://www.indiana.edu/~wts/pamphlets/thesis_statement.shtml) *& Rosenwasser, David and Jill Stephen, Writing Analytically, 2nd Ed., Harcourt College Publishers, 2000.)*