

How to Write an Effective Thesis Statement

What is a thesis statement?

- The main argument / claim you are making in a paper
- “Forecasts the content” of your paper – what should the reader expect? You want to guide your reader, rather than letting them make their own assumptions about your work.
- Is specific and analytical – a thesis “does not summarize an issue, but rather dissects it” (Minnesota Libraries Publishing Project)
- Comes early in the paper (usually in the first paragraph)

How to Think About Creating a Thesis Statement

Step One: Formulate a Research Question

- Think about the questions you want answered – what do you want to know about your texts or research field? What questions weren’t answered in your course readings? What connections have you found between texts? What common themes might you want to explore?

Step Two: Provide Your Answer to the Research Question (Argument)

- Begin by writing a sentence or two answering your own question (begin with just the basics). Once you have a starting place, start to revise for precision, make your argument more concise or elaborate, and keep building on your ideas.

Step Three: Lay Out the Sources/Data You Will Use to Prove Your Thesis (Evidence)

- What types of data or texts will you use to support your argument? Will you rely on a specific primary source (such as a literary text) or a conglomerate of research (such as multiple data sources)?

Step Four: Answer the “So What?” Question (Significance)

- Why does your research question need to be answered? What might it add to the existing scholarship in your field? How does it differ from what has already been written? (You won’t address all of these in your thesis, but try to pull out a main purpose of your work).

Checklist of a Strong Thesis Statement

- ✓ Clear and concise

- 1-2 sentences (rest of intro can explain hows, whys, and whats in more detail)
 - Presents summary picture of your main argument
 - Avoids hedging (“I hope to show,” “I will try to prove,” etc.)
- ✓ Specific and Arguable
- Avoids broad / unprovable statements
 - Makes an arguable claim: can someone disagree with you?
 - Presents an original idea, not just a summary of other sources
- ✓ Important and Engaging
- Offers something new to the scholarly conversation
 - Is interesting to your reader – it intrigues them to read the rest of your paper

Three Key Statements

As you begin creating your thesis, pay attention to completing these three sentences, which address the key elements of **argument**, **evidence**, and **significance**.

1. In this paper, I will argue that _____.
2. I will do so by using _____ as evidence.
3. The purpose of my research is _____.

The order of these elements might not always be the same, depending on the structure of your introduction as a whole. The following examples show some of the different ways that the Argument-Evidence-Significance approach might be applied in a thesis statement:

Argument – Evidence - Significance	
This example provides an excellent use of a strong argument, specific use of evidence, and contextually based explanation of significance. The language used is clear and concise and could be easily inserted into the “three key statements” exercise above.	<p>“In this essay, I argue that a particular order of imagery, which I will term ‘invisible images,’ emerged in answer to this pressing question to represent the barely visible Reformed church as the vehicle of the invisible ‘true Church of Christe.’ Juxtaposing images of invisibility from Foxe’s <i>Acts and Monuments</i> and Spenser’s <i>The Faerie Queen</i> reveals not only new aspects of these historical and poetic projects, but also the subtlety and depth of the English Reformation’s continuous struggle to define both itself and its modes of apprehending divine truth.”</p> <p>Claire Falck, “‘Heavenly Lineaments’ and the Invisible Church in Foxe and Spenser,” <i>Studies in</i></p>

	<i>English Literature, 1500-1900</i> 53, 1 (Winter 2013), 2.
<u>Significance – Evidence - Argument</u> While the order of elements is different than the example above, this thesis provides a similarly clear expression of how the essay fits into larger themes, what evidence (in this case symbolic rather than specifically textual) the author looked at, and how she structures her specific argument.	<p><i>"This essay explores the ways in which two interrelated concepts – Christlike self-sacrifice and the promise of salvation – contributed to the public image of [Queen Elizabeth], and how these concepts functioned to enhance her claims to power. In doing so, I focus particular attention on three symbols which are traditionally associated with Christ but which are employed in Elizabeth's iconography: the pelican, the phoenix, and the orb. I argue that, when used in portraits and other representations of the queen, these symbols merit closer consideration as visual referents to Christ's redemptive suffering and the hope of salvation it offered."</i></p> <p>Meryl Bailey, "'Salvatrix Mundi': Representing Queen Elizabeth I as a Christ Type," <i>Studies in Iconography</i> 29 (2008), 177.</p>
<u>Significance – Argument – Evidence</u> The 'argument' here is based more on contextual information than a specific arguable claim, which would have to be developed in further detail throughout the rest of the introduction.	<p><i>"In this essay, we would like to make a foray into a gendered legal history of early modern England through the problem of slander as experienced by contemporary women and as represented and commented upon in Shakespeare's play <i>The Winter's Tale</i>."</i></p> <p>M. Lindsay Kaplan and Katherine Eggert, "'Good Queen, my lord, good queen': Sexual Slander and the Trials of Female Authority in 'The Winter's Tale,'" <i>Renaissance Drama</i> 25 (1994), 90.</p>

Common Issues with Thesis Statements

While the above are models of successful and effective thesis statements, the following examples show some common pitfalls to avoid while crafting your thesis:

Issue	Example
Makes too sweeping/grand a statement This claim is too broad and unprovable to be argued, so doesn't offer an intriguing thesis that	<i>"The Great Gatsby</i> is inarguably the best-written novel of the last 100 years, leaving millions of readers with either a renewed or disenchanted view of the "American Dream."

makes the reader want to know more about the topic. It may also put many readers off of reading the paper if they disagree with the foundational broad claim the author is making.	
<p>Is too tentative</p> <p>This thesis includes too many hedging statements (“it seems as if,” “in my opinion”), rather than offering a strong and confident argument.</p>	<p>"In his novel The Long Walk, it seems as if Stephen King is attempting to make a statement about the evils of laissez-faire capitalism, and in my opinion the characters and settings reflected this well."</p>
<p>Is too vague</p> <p>Beginning with a vague and tentative statement does little to either set up the key points of a paper or show why the reader should read this paper instead of others on the topic.</p>	<p>"In this essay I will try to prove that drugs such as Prozac and Paxil are unnecessary and probably dangerous."</p>

Examples from University of Richmond Writing Center

Keep evolving!

The draft of thesis is your starting place, not your destination. You will almost always end up revising your thesis statement after you actually write your paper. Don't get too attached to one concept/approach, but instead let your work evolve as you go.

For Further Practice with Thesis Statements...

- Review scholarly articles in your field. Highlight the thesis statements, paying particular attention to issues of argument, evidence, and significance. What structure gives you as the reader the clearest sense of the author's thesis? Save examples of the thesis statements you find most effective and use them as templates for your own work.
- Minnesota Libraries Publishing Project: Developing a Strong, Clear Thesis Statement provides a detailed examination of important elements to consider as you create and revise your thesis statement: <https://mlpp.pressbooks.pub/writingsuccess/chapter/9-1-developing-a-strong-clear-thesis-statement/>
- The University of Richmond Writer's Web Thesis Statement Exercise offers more examples of strengths and weaknesses of thesis statements:
<http://writing2.richmond.edu/writing/wweb/thesisexercise.html>