WRITING A THESIS

The thesis statement is the most important sentence in an essay. In a sense, the thesis statement is a one-sentence summary of the entire essay. The thesis should not just give readers a general idea of the topic of an essay but should present specific statements of each of the main ideas developed in the essay.

The thesis statement is a one-sentence statement in the introduction of an essay that

1. Identifies the subject of the essay

For example, the thesis statement for an essay on a short story should include the title of the story and the name of the author.

1. States the main ideas developed in the body paragraphs

Be specific as you list each of the main ideas in the thesis statement, using key words from the topic sentence of each body paragraph.

1. Clarifies how all of the main ideas are logically related

Avoid just listing the main ideas in the thesis statement. Instead, show how the main ideas are logically related. In the thesis statement, present the main ideas in the same order that they appear in the body of the essay, and try using words such as "although," "as a result," and "but" to suggest the logical connections among the main ideas.

Generally, the thesis statement appears at the end of an introduction. The earlier part of the introduction should get the reader's attention and lead the reader to the thesis statement.

Do not present the thesis statement as a general statement concerning the subject of the essay followed by a series of sentences identifying the main ideas in the body paragraph. This formula is sometimes taught in high school to help writers organize their essays, but it is weak stylistically and often results in essays that are not well unified.

**Sample Thesis Statement for an Essay on Maya Angelou's "Graduation"**

**Sample thesis statement:**

In Maya Angelou's "Graduation," Marguerite Johnson's sense of pride in her academic achievements and upcoming graduation is challenged by the commencement speaker's stereotypical views of African-Americans, but a familiar song renews Marguerite's sense of accomplishment while giving her a greater awareness of the struggles and achievements of her ancestors.

Notice all of the important elements of the thesis statement:

* In Maya Angelou's "Graduation" = the subject of the essay: the title and author of the essay being analyzed.
* Marguerite Johnson's sense of pride in her academic achievements and upcoming graduation = identifies the main idea to be developed in the first body paragraph.
* is challenged by the commencement speaker's stereotypical views of African-Americans = identifies the main idea to be developed in the second body paragraph.
* but a familiar song renews Marguerite's sense of accomplishment while giving her a greater awareness of the struggles and achievements of her ancestors = identifies the main idea to be developed in the third body paragraph.

The thesis statement is expressed as just **one sentence,** gives readers a specific sense of the main ideas, and indicates the logical connections among those ideas.

Does it take a lot of writing and rewriting to formulate an effective thesis statement? Yes. But it should help if you come up with the main ideas for body paragraphs before you try to write your thesis statement.

**Thesis Statement Checklist**

It’s important to be able to decipher if you have a strong thesis or not. If possible, ask your teacher to look it over. If you’re writing for a timed writing, you will have to evaluate for yourself if your thesis is acceptable. Here are some helpful ways to do this:

* First and foremost, does your thesis address the prompt/question? If not, start over!
* After writing the paper, ask yourself: “Do the main points in my paper support my thesis?” You want your paper to be clear in the direction you’re taking – like a road map.
* Does the thesis give enough depth to sum up your entire paper?

1. Is the thesis statement expressed as just one sentence?
2. Does the thesis statement appear at the end of the introduction?
3. Does the thesis statement identify the subject of the essay?
4. Does the thesis statement present the major ideas developed in the body paragraphs?
5. Does the thesis statement clarify how all of the main ideas are logically related?

**What Not To Do In A Thesis!!:**

• Don’t’ state “I think”, “In my opinion”, “I will prove that…”, etc.

• Don’t’ go more than one sentence

• Don’t use vague/dull words

• Don’t state it as a question

• Don’t quote someone else in your thesis

**What To Do In A Thesis!!:**

• Do answer the prompt/question at hand

• Do write it in one sentence

• Do take this time to use your colons and semicolons

• Do put your thesis at the end of your first paragraph

• Do give enough information to guide your audience

• Do take a stance

**Bad & Better Thesis Statements**

This is not an exhaustive list of bad thesis statements, but here are five kinds of problems most often seen.

**1. The non-thesis thesis:**

A thesis takes a position on an issue. It is different from a topic sentence in that a thesis statement is not neutral. It announces, in addition to the topic, the argument you want to make or the point you want to prove. This is your own opinion that you intend to back up. This is your reason and motivation for writing.

**Bad Thesis 1:** In his article Stanley Fish shows that we don't really have the right to free speech.

**Bad Thesis 2:** This paper will consider the advantages and disadvantages of certain restrictions on free speech.

**Better Thesis 1:** Stanley Fish's argument that free speech exists more as a political prize than as a legal reality ignores the fact that even as a political prize it still serves the social end of creating a general cultural atmosphere of tolerance that may ultimately promote free speech in our nation just as effectively as any binding law.

**Better Thesis 2:** Even though there may be considerable advantages to restricting hate speech, the possibility of chilling open dialogue on crucial racial issues is too great and too high a price to pay.

**2. The overly broad thesis:**

A thesis should be as specific as possible, and it should be tailored to reflect the scope of the paper. It is not possible, for instance, to write about the history of English literature in a 5 page paper. In addition to choosing simply a smaller topic, strategies to narrow a thesis include specifying a method or perspective or delineating certain limits.

**Bad Thesis 1:** There should be no restrictions on the 1st amendment.

**Bad Thesis 2:** The government has the right to limit free speech.

**Better Thesis 1:** There should be no restrictions on the 1st amendment if those restrictions are intended merely to protect individuals from unspecified or otherwise unquantifiable or unverifiable "emotional distress."

**Better Thesis 2:** The government has the right to limit free speech in cases of overtly racist or sexist language because our failure to address such abuses would effectively suggest that our society condones such ignorant and hateful views.

**3. The uncontestable thesis:**

A thesis must be arguable. And in order for it to be arguable, it must present a view that someone might reasonably contest. Sometimes a thesis ultimately says, "we should be good," or "bad things are bad." Such thesis statements are tautological or so universally accepted that there is no need to prove the point.

**Bad Thesis 1:** Although we have the right to say what we want, we should avoid hurting other people's feelings.

**Bad Thesis 2:** There are always alternatives to using racist speech.

**Better Thesis 1:** If we can accept that emotional injuries can be just as painful as physical ones we should limit speech that may hurt people's feelings in ways similar to the way we limit speech that may lead directly to bodily harm.

**Better Thesis 2:** The "fighting words" exception to free speech is not legitimate because it wrongly considers speech as an action.

**4. The "list essay" thesis:**

A good argumentative thesis provides not only a position on an issue, but also suggests the structure of the paper. The thesis should allow the reader to imagine and anticipate the flow of the paper, in which a sequence of points logically proves the essay's main assertion. A list essay provides no such structure, so that different points and paragraphs appear arbitrary with no logical connection to one another.

**Bad Thesis 1:** There are many reasons we need to limit hate speech.

**Bad Thesis 2:** None of the arguments in favor of regulating pornography are persuasive.

**Better Thesis 1:** Among the many reasons we need to limit hate speech the most compelling ones all refer to our history of discrimination and prejudice, and it is, ultimately, for the purpose of trying to repair our troubled racial society that we need hate speech legislation.

**Better Thesis 2:** None of the arguments in favor of regulating pornography are persuasive because they all base their points on the unverifiable and questionable assumption that the producers of pornography necessarily harbor ill will specifically to women.

**5. The research paper thesis:**

In another course this would not be at all unacceptable, and, in fact, possibly even desirable. But in this kind of course, a thesis statement that makes a factual claim that can be verified only with scientific, sociological, psychological or other kind of experimental evidence is not appropriate. You need to construct a thesis that you are prepared to prove using the tools you have available, without having to consult the world's leading expert on the issue to provide you with a definitive judgment.

**Bad Thesis 1:** Americans today are not prepared to give up on the concept of free speech.

**Bad Thesis 2:** Hate speech can cause emotional pain and suffering in victims just as intense as physical battery.

**Better Thesis 1:** Whether or not the cultural concept of free speech bears any relation to the reality of 1st amendment legislation and jurisprudence, its continuing social function as a promoter of tolerance and intellectual exchange trumps the call for politicization (according to Fish's agenda) of the term.

**Better Thesis 2:** The various arguments against the regulation of hate speech depend on the unspoken and unexamined assumption that emotional pain is either trivial.

**The Thesis Tests**

1. Is this a complete sentence (and not a question)?

2. Does it have an opposing argument?

2. Is every word clear and unambiguous in meaning?

3. Is the sentence a dead end, or does it call for additional information and explanation?

4. Does the statement make such a large claim that you believe the writer has no hope of proving it to be true in the space of 4 to 6 pages?

5. What evidence will you need to see before you will believe that the thesis is true?