

# Thesis Statement Basics

## I. What is the purpose of a thesis statement?

A thesis statement informs the readers of the content, the argument, and often the direction of a paper.

## II. Do I need to write a thesis statement?

Students should always write thesis statements in their essays. Most instructors, whether or not they state that they want a thesis statement in a paper, do appreciate having one. English instructors require thesis statements. Professional writers sometimes imply their thesis statements rather than write them but always have one in mind as they write.

## III. What is a thesis statement?

### A. A thesis statement is a declarative sentence.

#### 1. Thesis statements are **not titles or fragments**.

- Title: My First Smoking Experience
- Thesis: Although all my friends thought cigarettes were stylish, I discovered that smoking is actually a disgusting habit with many health risks.
  
- Title: Finding a Solution to Campus Parking Problems
- Thesis: To solve the lack of parking space at Sierra College, administrators should use lottery funds to build parking lots.
  
- Fragment: That we should become more aware of our environment
- Thesis: We should become more aware of our environment so that we can preserve our wilderness, protect wildlife, and conserve our rapidly disappearing resources.

#### 2. Thesis statements are **not questions**.

- Question: How could we still tolerate sexism in the military today?
- Thesis: Even though Americans claim to be enlightened about sexism, sexist language and behaviors still prevail in the military.
  
- Question: Why are biofeedback techniques excellent methods of stress reduction?
- Thesis: Because of its simplicity, accuracy, and lack of toxicity, biofeedback is often a successful technique for migraine relief.

3. Thesis statements are **not commands**.

- Command: Note the differences between cooks and chefs.
- Thesis: Although meals prepared by either cooks or chefs can be equally delicious, chefs differ from cooks in education, professional commitment, and artistry.
- Command: Observe what happened to me during my first white water rafting experience.
- Thesis: My first white water rafting experience challenged my body, my mind, and my spirit, transforming me into an adult.

**B. A thesis statement is an arguable idea.**

1. Thesis statements are **not facts**.

- Fact: Cortez conquered Mexico in 1509.
- Thesis: The colonial mentality which prompted Cortez's barbaric invasion of Mexico brought about not an advance of native society but a destruction of Aztec culture.
- Fact: When I was six, my parents took me on a trip to Alaska where I experienced my first tragedy.
- Thesis: Witnessing the death of my brother in an Alaskan avalanche last winter horrified me at the time but in retrospect taught me to appreciate the small things in life, to value my relationships, and to trust in God.

2. Thesis statements are **not announcements** of the author's purpose or assignment.

- Announcement: In this paper I will discuss the causes and effects of the French Revolution and then argue as to whether or not it was successful.
- Thesis: Though the reasons for the French Revolution were noble— liberté, fraternité, égalité—the effects were devastating, ultimately leading to the unsuccessful reinstatement of the monarchy and the restructuring of a classist society into a militaristic one.
- Announcement: This essay will explain my reasons for supporting capital punishment for first-degree murderers.
- Thesis: First-degree murderers should receive capital punishment because there are too many repeat offenders, because rehabilitation programs have proved ineffective, and because murder is too heinous a crime to be punished by anything less than death.

3. Thesis statements are **not merely observations of the obvious**.

- Obvious: Litter creates pollution of the environment.
- Thesis: Recycling programs, though expensive at first, are ultimately an efficient, cost effective, and environmentally sound means of reducing waste in our environment.
- Obvious: The computer was an important technological advancement in the twentieth century.
- Thesis: Even though computers have their idiosyncrasies, they have improved our lives tremendously by simplifying word processing, streamlining data storage, and promoting an international exchange of information.

4. Thesis statements are **not unarguable personal opinions**.

- Opinion: I like chocolate.
- Thesis: Even though chocolate tantalizes my taste buds and satiates my emotional need to be loved, it causes weight gain, clogs arteries, and contains caffeine.
- Opinion: My favorite color is green.
- Thesis: Colors do more than indicate personal preference: they reveal emotions, indicate purpose, act symbolically, and influence subconscious thoughts.

**C. A thesis statement is specific and narrowed.**

1. Thesis statements **are not broad overgeneralizations**.

- Broad: All feminists are militant.
- Narrow: Gloria Steinem has helped positively change society's perspective on women's roles at home and in the workplace.
- Broad: Men are chauvinists.
- Narrow: Men who repress their true feelings leave themselves open to physical, psychological, and relationship difficulties.

2. Thesis statements **cover only one topic**.

- Many topics: Marijuana and television pornography should not be legalized because they negatively influence young children.
- One topic: Medicinal marijuana use should not be legalized because it creates problems for peace officers, physicians, and parents.
- Many topics: The theme, characters, setting, irony, conflicts, viewpoint, and plot all contribute to making Madame Bovary a tragedy.
- One topic: Flaubert's Emma Bovary is a tragic character because, never seeing reality, she misses some important clues that her life has gone awry, and she falls from her social "height" into prostitution.

3. Thesis statements often **focus the essay and guide its direction.**

- Unfocused: Martin Luther King, Jr. is a role model for everyone to follow.
- Focused: Because of his determination, his courage to follow his beliefs, and his unwavering sense of justice, Martin Luther King, Jr. is a symbol of American freedom.
  
- Unfocused: Amy Tan's The Joy Luck Club is a candid portrayal of Chinese American mother-daughter relationships.
- Focused: In The Joy Luck Club, Amy Tan skillfully illustrates how cultural, generational, and internal conflicts between Chinese American mothers and daughters all add to the difficulty and character of the immigrant experience.

**D. Thesis statements are worthy of development in an academic paper and interest an adult audience.**

1. Thesis statements are **not simplistic.**

- Simplistic: Cats and dogs look different and act differently.
- More interesting: Though seemingly adorable and tame, mountain lion cubs are actually wild, dangerous predators.

2. Thesis statements are **not immature or tasteless.**

- Tasteless: Passing gas in an elevator was an extremely embarrassing moment for me because I learned that I had a problem and that others are more observant than I had thought.
- Suitable: Though the product of slick advertising, psyllium does not effectively deal with flatulence, diverticulosis, or colon cancer. (The topic is now more academic.)

OR

- Suitable: After fainting in an elevator, I experienced acute embarrassment but learned that I cannot always be self-reliant and that caring for others is important. (The new topic is an appropriate one for a college audience.)

**Note:** Always check with your instructor if you are unsure about the suitability of your thesis for your audience.

#### **E. Thesis statements are concise.**

- Wordy: Censorship should be banned by everyone in all circumstances and all states in the nation because it destroys the rights of free speech guaranteed to us by the Constitution of the United States since the Constitution was written by John Hancock and all of the other statesmen.
- Concise: Censorship should be banned in the United States because it destroys the constitutionally guaranteed right of free speech.
- Wordy: In my opinion it is evident that requiring vehicles purchased before a certain date to go through two smog checks and drivers to pay extra money for the whole procedure is a bureaucratic ploy to elect certain officials to high offices and to raise funds for state transportation departments in dire need of additional resources to waste on more bureaucratic folderol by creating more unfinished projects.
- Concise: Requiring vehicles purchased before 1981 to receive two smog checks is a wasteful political ploy for election and funding.

#### **IV. How do I write a thesis statement?**

##### **A. Decide on your topic.**

- poetry in my English textbook

##### **B. Narrow your topic.**

- Contrast gender characteristics in two poems
- Emily Dickinson's "Because I could not stop for Death" contrasted with John Donne's "Death Be Not Proud"

##### **C. Put your topic in a sentence.**

- Emily Dickinson's "Because I could not stop for Death" **is different from** John Donne's "Death Be Not Proud."

##### **D. Add your argument, viewpoint, or opinion to your topic to make your thesis persuasive.**

- Emily Dickinson's "Because I could not stop for Death" **is essentially a more feminine poem**, while John Donne's "Death Be Not Proud" **is more masculine**.

##### **E. Elaborate on your thesis so that it addresses all parts of your assignment.**

- **Although Emily Dickinson and John Donne both personify death in their poems, the tone, language, and images are** clearly feminine in "Because I could not stop for Death," and masculine in "Death Be Not Proud."

**F. Organize your thesis to guide the direction of your paper.**

- Although Emily Dickinson and John Donne both personify death in their poems **the tone, images, and language** are clearly more feminine in "Because I could not stop for Death," than in "Death Be Not Proud."

**G. Check your thesis against the criteria on this handout, part I: A through E. Repeat steps A through G in the "How Do I Write a Thesis Statement" section if necessary.**

**H. Edit your thesis for content, word choice, precision, and mechanics.**

- Although Emily Dickinson and John Donne both personify death in their poems, the images, language, and tone clearly **reveal a woman's perspective** in "Because I Could Not Stop for Death," and **a man's perspective** in "Holy Sonnet 10."

**V. Where should I put my thesis statement?**

- The most common, and often required, spot for a thesis statement is at the end of the introductory paragraph or paragraphs.

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