

# Thesis Statements

BASICS: WHAT THEY ARE AND HOW TO USE THEM EFFECTIVELY

SUNY POTSDAM COLLEGE WRITERS' BLOCK

## What is a Thesis Statement?

A thesis statement is a specific argument you make in an essay. Usually it's one sentence, but sometimes you can use two. It's a statement that expresses your main point in a paper – *and your reasoning for that point*. It should be the last sentence in your introduction (unless your teacher tells you otherwise). You'll defend this position throughout your paper.

It's arguably the most important part of your paper, because all of your examples and analyses support it. It sounds like a lot, but remember that it can be revised as you draft.

## Why is it Important?

Without a thesis statement, a paper has no direction. **A thesis lets you know from the start where the paper is heading.** It is a direct statement that lets the reader know exactly what you're discussing, how you're discussing it, and what your claim is. It says: *this is the one point I'm going to convince you of.*

Your final thesis should be detailed and specific. It is a statement that you treat as a fact, because you spend the rest of the paper proving it with evidence from the text, your research, or your own analysis. You might have a few versions of your thesis as you draft the paper. If your paper changes, your thesis should change to reflect that.

## How to Form a Thesis

The thesis is a complex statement that announces the point you're supporting throughout the essay. But it should also summarize how you'll support it.

To write a good thesis, you're going to have to think about your points and weave them together. If you're really struggling, it's possible the points you want to make don't connect well. Think about them carefully. Re-assess, and rewrite the points if necessary. That's why we keep *rewriting and improving the thesis* as we work out our points and support.

It's hard to think about all the pieces of a thesis statement at once. It has to announce the point. It has to summarize how you'll support that point. It has to be grammatically correct. There's a lot to think about, and a lot of pressure.

Don't get bogged down by all the requirements of a thesis statement. You can use the following list of questions to help you create a working thesis. By answering these questions separately, you make sure to include all the elements of a thesis. Then you can put them together to make a complete thesis statement. **It's a lot easier to combine/alter ideas you already have written than to come up with them all at the same time. Take it in steps like this:**

### What are you talking about?

This one should be easy.

Literary: What book are you talking about?

Other: What topic are you focusing on?

### What do you want to talk about within that work/topic?

Literary: Do you want to focus on a theme? A character, or characters?

Other: Are you looking at causes of an event? Results?

### What do you want to say about it?

Literary: Say you do want to talk about a character. What do you want to say about them? Maybe you noticed they have a trait that gets them in trouble a lot. You could decide to write about that.

Other: Say you want to look at the causes of the American Revolution. Do you want to focus on economic factors, or social? Maybe you like the correspondence between the colonies and England in the months leading up to the war, and noticed that the monarchy bullied the colonies into fighting. You could decide to write about that.

### How are you going to support that?

Literary: Find evidence in the book to support what you want to say. If you want to say that Dally has a temper that gets him in trouble a lot, find examples in the book where he gets in trouble. Is the trouble his fault? Make sure the example supports what you want to say.

Other: Find specific evidence to support your belief that the monarchy forced the colonies to go to war. Did the colonies try peaceful protests? How did the monarchy react? Reread your sources with your topic in mind.

### Who are you writing for?

Literary: Is your audience familiar with the book? If they are, you don't need to include as much background information. If they aren't, a bit of background may be helpful. In this case, you may consider describing the character.

Other: Does the audience know the background of the event you're writing about? Be sure to orient them to time and place, and define any relevant terms they'll need to know.

### Why are you talking about it?

Trying to think of why your point *matters* can help you find motivation to write.

Literary: Why is it important for you to talk about how Dally tends to get in trouble? Think about how it relates to the plot, or to the other characters.

Other: Why does this event matter today? Why is this interpretation of events important?

Put all of these questions together, and you might get a thesis like this:

*In **The Outsiders**, the character Dally has a temper that frequently gets him into trouble, which makes his friends worry about him.*

Or this:

*In analyzing the correspondence between the American colonies and the British monarchy, it's clear that the monarchy gave the colonists no option other than war.*

Each step highlights an important part of a thesis statement. Once you've identified these important parts, it's easier to make a thesis and start your paper.

## RESPONSE EXERCISE ONE

Think about your favorite book or movie and complete the following.

1. Try to create a thesis on your own, without using the outlined steps.
2. Try making a thesis using the steps outlined above.
3. Write a few sentences comparing the two efforts. Which thesis statement was better?

## Write a "Working Thesis"

Sometimes you still have trouble figuring out exactly what your argument is, even after answering those questions. Maybe the wording just isn't right. Coming up with a temporary, working thesis is better than nothing. You can treat it like a hypothesis – pick a direction to go in, and test it out. You can always modify it later.

*It's okay to revise as you go.* It's actually encouraged, because it means you're actively engaging with the assignment.

Don't worry about having a perfect thesis statement from the start. Trying to make it perfect will put too much pressure on you, and impede your writing ability. A draft is meant to be changed.

Make a working thesis to help you get your thoughts down on paper, and then go back and refine it. It's much more productive than stressing from the start.

## Make a Final Thesis

*~ It is a statement that you treat as a fact, because you spend the rest of the paper proving it with evidence from the text, your research, or your own analysis. ~*

If you do use a working thesis, you'll need to refine it after writing the draft. Don't get caught up in time pressure and forget to rewrite that thesis to fit the body!

The thesis is a promise to the reader that this is the point you're going to explain and support – so you must rewrite your thesis as the body of your paper changes...

A final thesis represents a final paper. Put as much thought into your thesis as you do the body, and you'll see a change in your writing.

## MORE INFORMATION

Video on [Literary Thesis Statements](#). Watch from 3:30 to 8:16.