

THE THESIS STATEMENT

THESIS STATEMENT FAQs

What is a thesis statement?

- A statement of the controlling idea, main claim or principal argument of the essay
- A statement of what the paper is going to show, argue, evaluate, discuss, critique, examine, explore, demonstrate ...

Why have a thesis statement?

- To inform the **reader** about the writer's position on a topic, and the direction of the paper (like a map)
- To keep the **writer** on track during the writing process (like a recipe)

Who writes it?

- **You** write your own thesis statement: It's **your position on the topic**, not a reiteration of the topic.

When is a thesis statement needed?

- In essays (research, comparison/contrast, critical review), and whenever an assignment asks specifically for one!

Where does it appear?

- Near the beginning of the essay, usually at the end of the introductory paragraph(s).

How do I create one?

1. Choose a topic that meets requirements, and narrow it to a manageable size.
2. Read, research, reflect, then decide on your point of view and how you want to argue it.
3. Refine your point of view and argument into a thesis statement. An example:

Topic: impact of the computer on education

Narrowing the focus: → time period? → since 1995 → specific group affected? → elementary school teachers → geographic area affected? → Ontario → impacts? → increased workload →

Thesis idea: Teacher's workload adversely affected by demand to learn computer skills.

THESIS STATEMENT: Despite early claims of technology as timesaver, recent Ontario studies show that the need for elementary schoolteachers to learn computer skills has substantially increased their workload.

CHARACTERISTICS OF A STRONG AND EFFECTIVE THESIS STATEMENT*

Characteristic	Explanation	Weak example	Strong example
RESTRICTED	keeps to idea/s to be developed, in order	Pollution is a serious problem. (too general; lacks focus)	Increasing smog in the Toronto area is largely due to under-occupied cars commuting from the suburbs.
UNIFIED	connects ideas using appropriate words ("although", "as a result", "because")	Many of the silent letters in English were once pronounced. The pronunciation changed, but the old spelling was standardized. (2 ideas here; could be 2 papers)	Many silent letters in English words are a result of standardizing the spelling while the pronunciation was still changing.
PRECISE	avoids vague language and generalities ("interesting", "inspiring", "unusual")	Plato's <i>Republic</i> is one of the most fascinating and brilliant books ever written. (too vague; language used is inappropriate)	By linking the issue of personal justice to an account of justice in the city, Plato's <i>Republic</i> connects ethics with politics and invites reflections on both.
ARGUABLE	claim made is open to debate	Art means different things to different people. (self-evident claim)	Van Gogh's paintings were the work of a madman.

*table adapted from J.M. McCrimmon, *Writing with a Purpose*. 7th ed. Houghton Mifflin, 1980

SOME MYTHS ABOUT THESIS STATEMENTS

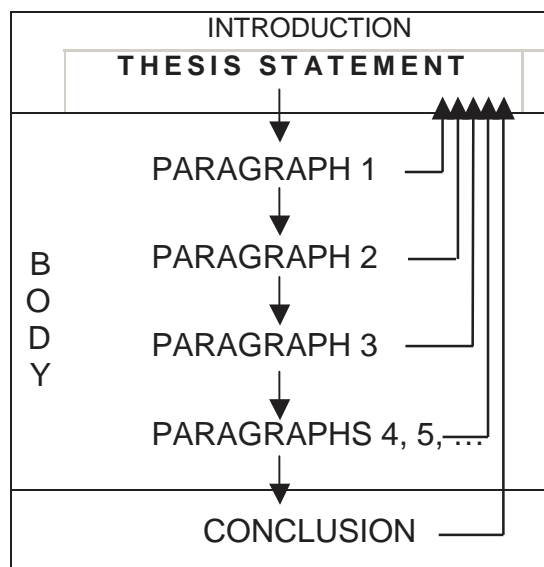
- *Every paper requires one.* Assignments that ask you to write personal responses or to explore a subject don't want you to seem to pre-judge the issues. Essays of literary interpretation often want you to be aware of many effects rather than seeming to box yourself into one view of the text.
- *A thesis statement must come at the end of the first paragraph.* This is a natural position for a statement of focus, but it's not the only one. Some theses can be stated in the opening sentences of an essay; others need a paragraph or two of introduction; others can't be fully formulated until the end.
- *A thesis statement must be one sentence in length, no matter how many clauses it contains.* Clear writing is more important than rules like these. Use two or three sentences if you need them. A complex argument may require a whole tightly-knit paragraph to make its initial statement of position.
- *You can't start writing an essay until you have a perfect thesis statement.* It may be advisable to draft a hypothesis or tentative thesis statement near the start of a big project, but changing and refining a thesis is a main task of thinking your way through your ideas as you write a paper. And some essay projects need to explore the question in depth without being locked in before they can provide even a tentative answer.
- *A thesis statement must give three points of support.* It should indicate that the essay will explain and give evidence for its assertion, but points don't need to come in any specific number.

Myths about thesis statements written by Dr. Margaret Procter, Coordinator, Writing Support, University of Toronto. © 2004. All rights reserved.

RELATING THE THESIS STATEMENT TO THE REST OF YOUR ESSAY

REMEMBER: Your thesis statement articulates your position. Your essay supports your thesis. The paragraphs in the body of your essay must connect with each other as well as with your thesis statement (see Figure 1).

So, **STAY FLEXIBLE!** Revise and/or refocus as necessary (thesis, body paragraphs or both) if further research causes your position to change, or to maintain coordination between thesis statement and body.



ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

<http://www.wisc.edu/writing/Handbook/Thesis.html> – University of Wisconsin Writing Centre offers step-by-step advice for creating a thesis statement, and even some formulas for when you get absolutely stuck.

<http://webster.commnet.edu/grammar/composition/thesis.htm> – Capital College Community Foundation Guide to Grammar and Writing offers a detailed, thoughtful discussion of thesis statements, with examples.

<http://www.utoronto.ca/writing/thesis.html> – University of Toronto Writing page offers a good analysis of thesis statements and puts to rest some common misconceptions about thesis statements.

<http://www.yorku.ca/tutorial/prewriting/thesis.html> – York University's writing centre page on thesis statements offers more advice on moving from a topic to a thesis statement.

Note that all the above sites have information on much more than just thesis statements. Consult them for advice on other writing-related matters.

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