

## **THESIS STATEMENTS -- EXTENDED GUIDE**

A thesis statement is a direct, concise statement of an essay's major focus or assertion. Usually located at the end of the introduction, it guides the writer through the revision process and aids the reader in following the written argument.

Although students often view thesis statements as an academic hoop to jump through, once understood, the thesis is an essential tool in creating effective writing. The following principles guide the effective use of a thesis:

The thesis reflects the purpose of the essay.

The thesis defines the scope of the essay.

The thesis both influences and is influenced by the content.

The thesis may be stated or implied, but should always be evident.

### **1. The thesis reflects the purpose of the essay.**

Good writing starts with a purpose, which is simply the goal that you want to accomplish with your writing. Writing for an audience usually considers these questions:

Do you want to inform your readers about a particular subject?

Do you want to persuade them to change an attitude or behavior?

Do you want to entertain them?

Often, these purposes are combined. The purpose of a resume is to inform prospective employers of your qualifications so that they will be persuaded to hire you. The goal of a satiric letter to the editor might be to persuade community members of the absurdity of a current political situation in order to promote change. The intent of a personal letter or email might be to inform a friend about the events in your life in an entertaining way.

All good writing has purpose. Even writing without an audience has a purpose, although somewhat different since it usually focuses on writing as an aid for exploring or remembering.

Unfortunately, students tend to believe that purpose doesn't apply when writing academic assignments. They think, "I don't have a message I want to share. I'm only writing this because my teacher is making me." However, students usually do have a message that is meaningful to them, which is, "I deserve a good grade." The best way to send that message is with a clearly stated and supported thesis that proves that you have learned both the information and the skills that the class is trying to teach.

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Once you have determined your general purpose (to inform, to persuade, to entertain, or a combination), focus on your specific purpose, which will be reflected in your thesis. Consider the following questions:

What am I trying to tell my reader?

Why do I want to share this message?

Why should my reader be interested?

The answer to the first question produces a tentative thesis. The second two questions test the quality of that tentative thesis.

*What am I trying to tell my reader?*

Answer this question by completing the sentence, "I want to tell my reader that \_\_\_\_\_." The statement following "that" is the tentative thesis.

If you cannot answer this question, experiment with freewriting, brainstorming, clustering, reporters' questions, or your favorite prewriting activity until you find an idea that you want to develop and share with your reader(s).

*Why do I want to share this message?*

You may simply want to help your reader, or you may be motivated by self-interest, but you should have some motive for writing beyond, "My teacher is making me." If you cannot answer this question, then you may need to rethink your tentative thesis.

Try to start with a topic that is significant to you, or if the topic has been assigned, look for an aspect of the topic that you care about. This may require some serious thought, but the thought is worth the effort. If you don't care about your message, there is little chance that your reader will be interested.

*Why should my reader be interested?*

Before answering this question, start by identifying your reader or readers. Is your audience comprised of one person or a group? If your audience is a group, what common characteristics do they share? Place yourself in your readers' shoes. No one wants to be bored. If you cannot think of a reason for your reader to be interested in your message, then go back to your tentative thesis and revise it again. Avoid trite, over-obvious statements. Instead look for a statement that will make your reader want to continue reading to discover how you will develop your idea.

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If your reader is an instructor, you can probably assume that he or she has a general interest in the topic assigned, but you also should remember that your instructor has read or will read many papers on that same topic, so may still become bored easily. Try to find a unique perspective on the topic. A "correct" essay containing familiar, overworked information will often be graded as only a B or a C, while higher grades are often rewards for original thought. Instructors, like all readers, appreciate interesting ideas.

### **2. The thesis defines the scope of the essay.**

Once you have a tentative thesis that will be meaningful to both you and your readers, you need to make sure that it is limited appropriately. Try to make an honest assessment of how much you could write about your thesis. If you are not sure, you may need to begin drafting, or at least sketch out a rough outline. Then compare the amount of information you have or expect to find with the requirements of the assignment. If you discover that you could write 10-15 pages in support of your tentative thesis, but the assignment calls for 3-5, then you will need to narrow your topic.

However, the opposite is not always true. If you are having trouble making your essay long enough, broadening the thesis will not always solve the problem. Instead, you may need to make your thesis more specific and assertive. This may seem like a contradiction, but general statements by their nature are often obvious ideas that require little support. Compare the following two examples:

Most students don't like to write essays.

Students are more likely to dislike essay writing if they feel that the instructor values correctness above originality.

Notice that the first statement requires no explanation or support, which would make it difficult to develop even one interesting paragraph on the topic. The second statement, however, would require explanations of the terms "correctness" and "originality," as well as support proving that the assertion is true.

Once appropriately limited, the thesis provides the boundaries of the topic. In order to preserve the unity (or focus) of your essay, your information should not go outside those areas suggested by your thesis. Test unity by asking yourself how each idea in your essay supports your thesis. If you can't find an answer, that information probably doesn't belong in your essay.

On the other hand, your essay is not complete until your information fully supports your assertion. Try to view your essay through your reader's eyes. Does your thesis suggest any questions that have not been answered by the essay? Have you addressed any objections that your reader might have to your point of view? Ideally, your essay should resolve the readers' questions and objections.

### **3. The thesis both influences and is influenced by the content.**

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As discussed in the previous section, all of the ideas contained in the essay should be carefully selected in order to explain, develop, and support the thesis. As the writer, however, you should remember that the thesis is your creation, not your master. If your opinion or emphasis changes during the drafting or revising process, you are not locked into a thesis that you no longer believe in. Revise your thesis as needed to reflect your evolving ideas and purpose.

### **4. The thesis may be stated or implied, but it should always be evident.**

In academic essays, the thesis statement should usually be placed at the end of the introduction. This placement typically meets reader expectations, gives the thesis emphasis, and allows you to provide the reader any background information necessary to understand the thesis.

In professional essays, the thesis is often implied rather than stated, but no less important. If your instructor allows an implied thesis, you should still know what your thesis is and why you think your essay would be more effective if your thesis were not stated directly.

In either case, a reader should be able to identify your thesis after reading your essay. To test yourself, ask several friends or classmates to read your essay and summarize your main idea into one sentence. If they can correctly identify your main idea, then your thesis, whether stated or implied, is clear. If after your test readers cannot identify your main idea, then you will need to revise again.