

Writing a Good Thesis Statement

One of the most difficult aspects of writing can be deriving a good central idea or argument—a **thesis statement**—that holds your ideas together and gives your paper a unified direction. A thesis statement, in a single sentence, reveals the paper's purpose, provides justification to read the paper, and presents an opinion that will be supported in the paper. If you could write only one sentence to encapsulate the entire essay, this would be the thesis statement. It's the center of the paper around which everything revolves. More than a title, a thesis statement announces the intent and direction of the paper.

A good thesis statement does three things.

1. Answers a question or clearly expresses the paper's main idea.

The thesis communicates the main idea of the essay. It indicates how you'll present your material and what you'll say about it. Make sure your thesis answers all parts of the essay prompt.

2. Answers "So What" by saying something meaningful.

Your thesis statement needs to say something worth reading. Pretend the entire paper will be graded on this sentence. Does it say exactly what the paper covers? A precise statement of the paper's main idea is bound to be readable. Does it answer "so what"?

3. Presents an arguable statement the paper can support.

The thesis statement must be a statement of opinion, not fact. The purpose of the paper is to argue using documentation to support the thesis.

How you arrive at your thesis statement depends on a number of factors. Begin by looking at the notes you took while reading and the prewriting exercises you did.

If you've been given the question, such as on an essay test, derive the thesis from the question itself. Thoroughly read the question, jotting down ideas about how to answer it. Spend at least one quarter of your time writing the thesis, thinking about what you'll say, and how you'll say it. Writing the thesis helps you make sure you're answering the question being asked. Unlike writing a polished paper, you won't have time on an exam to revise the thesis several times. So leave enough time to construct your thesis during the planning phase.

If you don't have a guiding question to answer and must derive your own thesis, try these five steps to generate specific ideas for a thesis.

1. Narrow your topic to one specific idea. Rather than writing about all of Elizabethan drama, narrow the scope to one playwright, or better yet, one play.
2. Ask questions. Consider questions that don't lead to simple yes-or-no answers. Ask what puzzles you about the play. Why did Shakespeare write this? What do the characters represent? What is *Hamlet's* message?

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3. Look for relationships that emerge from the inquiry in step two. Brainstorm and play with your topic. As you're asking questions, see if certain themes emerge. Do the characters present the message? Does the dialogue reveal the characters?
4. When you think you're close to arriving at a thesis, phrase your thesis as a yes-or-no question. This helps limit the scope of the paper. Look at the question. If it can be easily answered yes, it needs to be limited.
5. Qualify the question. Limit it to a thesis that can be answered in the time or space allotted. Absolutes are impossible to prove.

Follow these suggestions to write a strong thesis.

Clearly state the writer's opinion. Good writing clearly states the author's intent.

Poor Thesis: The main character in the last play that William Shakespeare wrote abuses his patriarchal position, which creates commotion and, I think, could prevent Miranda from ever getting married or even being happy.

Better Thesis: Prospero, in William Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, abuses his patriarchal powers, which threatens his child's happiness.

Assert one idea. Each paper can only espouse one idea.

Poor Thesis: In *A Doll House*, Henrik Ibsen advocates Marxism to rectify both the blatant abuse of women in a male-dominated society and the dismal human social conditions, as human relationships are often subverted through economic considerations.

Better Thesis: In *A Doll House*, Henrik Ibsen uses Nora to demonstrate how women are confined in a male-dominated society.

Say something worthwhile. One vital purpose of a thesis is to inspire interest in the paper. Stating the obvious bores the reader.

Poor Thesis: William Shakespeare's *The Tempest* deals with shipwrecked people.

Better Thesis: Through Prospero's character in *The Tempest*, William Shakespeare shows the power of revenge to destroy the human spirit.

Limit the thesis to fit the assignment. If you're asked to write a two-page paper, your thesis can't hope to explain all about a Shakespearian play.

Poor Thesis: William Shakespeare masterfully explores the concepts of good and evil.

Better Thesis: In William Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, Ariel and Caliban serve as foils for each other, demonstrating the good and evil inherent in human nature.

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Use specific terms.

Poor Thesis: Reading Sophocles's *Oedipus Rex* is good for all students.

Better Thesis: Sophocles's *Oedipus Rex* confirms the messenger's statement in the play, "The greatest griefs are those we cause ourselves."

Make your thesis easily recognizable, and locate it at the start of the paper. A thesis can be implied, but it must be clearly guiding the paper. Just as a map indicates location, the thesis directs the paper. Without a clear thesis, readers will wander through your words wondering where in the world they are and what's happening. For short essays, the thesis may be the first sentence. Longer essays must include the thesis in the first two paragraphs.

Check your thesis statement by asking these questions.

1. Is my thesis a statement of opinion?
2. Does it clearly communicate my main idea?
3. Does my thesis statement announce my intent?
4. Does my thesis statement effectively make a statement, while avoiding such phrases as "deals with," "involves," "has a lot to do with," "is primarily concerned with," and "is commonly thought of"?
5. Can my thesis be addressed in the space allowed?
6. Is my thesis reasonable and, more importantly, readily provable?

From this thesis statement, you can build an essay supporting your ideas. You can revise your thesis statement at any stage of the writing process if a new idea comes to you or if you feel you don't have enough evidence to support a part of your claim.