

Information taken from: <http://www.sdast.org/shs/library/thesis.html>

## What is a thesis?

A thesis statement declares what you believe and what you intend to prove. A good thesis statement makes the difference between a thoughtful research project and a simple retelling of facts.

A good tentative thesis will help you focus your search for information. But don't rush! You must do a lot of background reading before you know enough about a subject to identify key or essential questions. You may not know how you stand on an issue until you have examined the evidence. You will likely begin your research with a working, preliminary or tentative thesis, which you will continue to refine until you are certain of where the evidence leads.

The thesis statement is typically located at the end of your opening paragraph (s). The opening paragraph(s) serves to set the context for the thesis.

Remember, your reader will be looking for your thesis. Make it clear, strong, and easy to find.

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## Attributes of a good thesis:

- It should be contestable, proposing an arguable point with which people could reasonably disagree. A strong thesis is provocative; it takes a stand and justifies the discussion you will present.
  - It tackles a subject that could be adequately covered in the format of the project assigned.
  - It is specific and focused. A strong thesis proves a point without discussing "everything about ..." Instead of music, think "American jazz in the 1930s" and your argument about it.
  - It clearly asserts your own conclusion based on evidence. Note: Be flexible. The evidence may lead you to a conclusion you didn't think you'd reach. **It is perfectly okay to change your thesis!**
  - It provides the reader with a map to guide him/her through your work.
  - It anticipates and refutes the counter-arguments
  - It avoids vague language (like "it seems").
  - It avoids the first person. ("I believe," "In my opinion")
  - It should pass the So what? or Who cares? test (Would your most honest friend ask why he should care or respond with "but everyone knows that"?). For instance, "people should avoid driving under the influence of alcohol," would be unlikely to evoke any opposition.
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## USING THESIS STATEMENTS

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When you are asked to write an essay that creates an argument, your reader will expect a clear statement of your position. Typically, this summary statement comes in the first paragraph of the essay, though there is no rigid rule about position. Here are some characteristics of good thesis statements, with samples of useful and inadequate ones. Note that the better examples substitute specific argumentative points for sweeping general statements; they indicate a theoretical basis and promise substantial support. (See *Myths About Thesis Statements* [over] for a discussion of times not to organize your writing around thesis statements.)

1. **It makes a definite and limited assertion that needs to be explained and supported by further discussion.**

*trite, irrelevant*

Shakespeare was the world's greatest playwright.

*intriguing*

The last scene in *Midsummer Night's Dream* adds a political dimension to the comedy ending by incorporating subtle linguistic and theatrical references to Elizabeth's position as queen.

2. **It shows the emphasis of your argument and indicates its methodology.**

*emotional, vague*

This essay will show that the North American Free Trade agreement was a disaster for the Canadian furniture industry.

*worth attention*

Neither neo-protectionism nor post-industrial theory explains the steep reversal of fortune for the Canadian furniture industry in the period 1988-1994. Data on productivity, profits, and employment, however, can be closely correlated with provisions of the North American Free Trade Agreement that took effect in the same period.

3. **It shows awareness of difficulties and disagreements.**

*sweeping, vague*

Having an official policy on euthanasia just causes problems, as the Dutch example shows.

*suitably complex*

Dutch laws on euthanasia have been praised for their use of the principle of self-determination. Recent cases, however, show that these laws have not been able to deal adequately with issues involving technological intervention on unconscious patients. Hamarckian theory is needed to enlarge the framework used in creating the Dutch law. It provides one way to examine the key question of how to assign rights.

**N.B. See over for a discussion of faulty ideas about thesis statements.**

### Thesis Statements Illustrated

- \*Shakespeare was the world's greatest playwright. (**trite, not defensible**)
- \*The last scene in "A Midsummer Night's Dream" showcases Shakespeare's ability to manipulate subtle linguistic differences among his characters for comic effect. (**intriguing**)
- \*This essay will show that the North American Free Trade agreement was a disaster for the furniture industry of Canada. (**Vague**)
- \*In recent years, transmission of measles in hospitals has been described only rarely. New data suggest that the spread of measles in hospitals is more frequent than previously recognized. (**information shows purpose and context, promises interest.**)

### Writing a Strong Thesis

A thesis controls an essay. A strong thesis is necessary in order to build strong arguments in order to prove a position on a topic.

To write a strong thesis, keep the following in mind:

- ✓ ✓ A thesis tells the reader what topic you have an opinion on
- ✓ ✓ A thesis also answers "so what"—why should the reader care? Why is your discussion going to be important? What will the reader understand when finished? What does the topic cause or how does it impact?
- ✓ ✓ A thesis does not list the arguments you'll be making (though sometimes this is an effective way to start thinking about your opinion on the matter). It is an "umbrella" statement that finds a common thread in upcoming arguments.
- ✓ ✓ A thesis is objective (in 3<sup>rd</sup> person) and does not use "I" or "you" anywhere in its contents. Nor does the paper unless you are using personal experience.

So, here are some examples of poor thesis statements you need to avoid:

**1. Loneliness is displayed in the novel *Of Mice and Men*.**

Yes it is. So what? Why do I care? What does loneliness *cause* or how does loneliness *impact* the characters?

**2. I think discrimination is the most destructive force in the book.**

"I"? I know you think. Why do you think it's the most destructive force? Because....

**3. George is not justified in killing Lennie at the end of the novel because he breaks the law, has no right to assume Lennie's decision making power, and just wants all of the problems Lennie brings them to end.**

You're listing your arguments. It's an ok first step, but now look at what's common between those arguments. Develop an "umbrella" thesis that incorporates the common points without listing the arguments you'll be developing in the body.

**Thesis Statement Worksheet**

What is your topic?: \_\_\_\_\_

What background information does the reader need to know before you state your thesis?: \_\_\_\_\_

1. What is your question? This should be a question about your topic.

2. What is your answer to the question?

3. What is connection to the world? (Why should anyone care?)

What is your **working thesis** statement?: \_\_\_\_\_

Test your thesis statement. Does your thesis statement:

- \* Make a claim that a reader can agree or disagree with?
- \* Reflect knowledge of the source material?
- \* Pick out an idea that can be defended in the space allowed?
- \* Limit the kinds of evidence you can use to defend it?

What evidence, examples, or arguments will you use to support the working thesis?: \_\_\_\_\_