

Hows and Whys of Thesis Statements

What is a thesis statement?

A thesis statement is the central claim that the author promises to defend in his paper.

Why do you need a thesis statement?

A thesis statement tells the reader where the paper is headed and why he should bother going there. When the reader has no choice but to read the paper (as when faculty are grading papers), the thesis statement signals that the writer is in control of the paper. Readers need such signals to see the writer in a positive light. From the writer's perspective, a thesis statement acts as a foundation on which to build the rest of the paper. A thesis statement, if it is a good one, protects the writer from including the half-baked, unnecessary, or irrelevant information that sneaks into papers in the early drafts. It should function as the conscience of a paper. Thus a thesis statement is the writer's ally as he rewrites the paper for greater precision and impact.

How do you come up with a thesis statement?

All papers and essays have a point. You can have some ideas on a topic, or about an issue, but until you understand what your point is, your writing will lack direction and focus. After you have read, researched, and reflected on the material, try to state out loud in the simplest terms what your chief claim or conclusion is. Here are some examples of simple claims you could make:

- A. I agree with the author that politicians should use language responsibly.
- B. The face plays an important role in human communication.
- C. Migrating birds need protection along their migration paths.

Sentences like these, each of which makes a claim, are adequate as "working thesis statements". As you write, research, arrange, and think through other supporting ideas in your paper, you should be moved to refine your working thesis statement to 1) narrow it, 2) make it more interesting or consequential, or 3) put it in a specific context. With more research and thought, we might revise A.-C. above as follows:

- A. The speed and spread of mass media today can make a life or death issue out of the words a politician uses in public.
- B. Although poets have always noted the role of the face in human communication, facial expression has lately become the subject of intense scientific scrutiny.
- C. When the Corps of Engineers drains swampland and redirects rivers, the impact on migrating bird populations can be immediate and deadly.

These revised thesis statements make specific promises to the reader. From them, a reader can predict the direction the paper ought to take, which is a sign of a good thesis statement. Further test the strength of your thesis statement by asking a friend to read your essay and state your central claim in a single sentence. If your friend reads out your thesis statement or paraphrases it closely, then you know you have something. (Not all of

your peers are equally skilled readers. Pick someone who is good at explaining things.) Finally, a good thesis statement gives you room to develop your ideas as you wish, but within the boundaries imposed by time and page limits. It fits the size and scope of your paper.

Four myths about thesis statements

◇ *A thesis statement is the topic of a paper or what the paper is 'about.'* If a reader knows that your paper is about migrating birds, she still doesn't know what your point is. Only a thesis statement can tell the reader that. A topic merely names the field or subject area of your paper; it doesn't propose anything. Topics are identified in background sentences that usually lead up to the thesis statement. Compare the topic sentence below (i) with the thesis statement (ii) that follows it:

- i. There are few people totally unfamiliar with bingo—that game of chance in which numbers, called at random, are plotted on cards to form patterns and to win prizes.
- ii. In order to understand bingo as a cultural phenomenon it should be studied not as a cultural 'thing' or isolated artifact but as behavior compatible with a patterned way of life.

◇ *There are strict rules about the form of a thesis statement.* You can learn to write better thesis statements by practicing with specific forms, e.g. one where a premise ("If term limits were adopted in Montana today...") is followed by a conclusion ("...we would lose valuable legislative experience."). Yet if you grasp the function of a thesis statement, many forms are possible. It may take the form of a supported assertion as in "I agree with the author because I have witnessed police brutality and know that it undermines the social contract most Americans take for granted." Short, pithy thesis statements are also possible as in "Television kills."—a claim, to be sure, but one which needs elaboration in nearby sentences to correctly direct the reader's focus.

◇ *Some writers put their thesis statement at the end of their paper.* This myth confuses the concluding section of a paper with the intellectual conclusion a writer must reach in order to begin writing a paper in earnest. Since a good thesis statement is the result of research, reflection, and, usually, a draft or two of the entire paper, it might seem that it ought to come at the end of one's essay. But, in academic writing in particular, what is the outcome of thinking and writing for the writer is best presented as the starting point for the reader. Many writers restate their thesis statement/hypothesis in the concluding section of their papers but few choose to delay revealing their central claim until after they have argued in favor of it.

◇ *You only need a thesis statement if the professor asks for one.* Most professors take for granted that college students know that every piece of formal writing has a focal point that originates with the writer. Whether you are asked to analyze, evaluate, explain, or describe something, you have to bring your composition into focus with an early statement that tells the professor what is coming and why. As you know, professors will judge you by how well you "get" the material in the course. In writing assignments, your thesis statement showcases your understanding of the assignment and the material. If you do not have a thesis statement, what message does that send to the professor?