



## THESIS STATEMENTS

### What Is a Thesis Statement?

#### A thesis statement:

- tells the reader **how you will interpret the significance of the subject matter** under discussion.
- is a **road map for the paper**; in other words, it tells the reader what to expect from the rest of the paper.
- **directly answers the question asked of you**. A thesis is an interpretation of a question or subject, not the subject itself. The subject, or topic, of an essay might be World War II or Moby Dick; a thesis must then offer a way to understand the war or the novel.
- **makes a claim** that others might dispute.
- is usually a **single sentence near the beginning of your paper (most often, at the end of the first paragraph) that presents your argument to the reader**. The rest of the paper, the body of the essay, gathers and organizes evidence that will persuade the reader of the logic of your interpretation.

### How Do I Create a Thesis?

A thesis is the result of a **lengthy thinking process**. Formulating a thesis is not the first thing you do after reading an essay assignment. Before you develop an argument on any topic, you have to collect and organize evidence, look for possible relationships between known facts (such as surprising contrasts or similarities), and think about the significance of these relationships. Once you do this thinking, you will probably have a “working thesis” that presents a basic or main idea and an argument that you think you can support with evidence. **Both the argument and your thesis are likely to need adjustment along the way.**

### How Do I Know If My Thesis Is Strong?

If there's time, run it by your professor or make an appointment at the Writing Lab to get some feedback. Even if you do not have time to get advice elsewhere, you can do some thesis evaluation of your own. **When reviewing your first draft and its working thesis, ask yourself the following:**

- **Do I answer the question?** Re-reading the question prompt after constructing a working thesis can help you fix an argument that misses the focus of the question.
- **Have I taken a position that others might challenge or oppose?** If your thesis simply states facts that no one would, or even could, disagree with, it's possible that you are simply providing a summary, rather than making an argument.
- **Is my thesis statement specific enough?** Thesis statements that are too vague often do not have a strong argument. If your thesis contains words like "good" or "successful," see if you could be more specific. Why is something "good"? What specifically makes something "successful"?
- **Does my thesis pass the "So what?" test?** If a reader's first response is likely to be "So what?" then you need to clarify, to forge a relationship, or to connect to a larger issue.
- **Does my essay support my thesis specifically and without wandering?** If your thesis and the body of your essay do not seem to go together, one of them has to change. It's okay to change your working thesis to reflect things you have figured out in the course of writing your paper. Remember, always reassess and revise your writing as necessary.
- **Does my thesis pass the "how and why?" test?** If a reader's first response is "how?" or "why?" your thesis may be too open-ended and lack guidance for the reader. See what you can add to give the reader a better take on your position right from the beginning.

#### Examples Thesis Statements

**Too Simple, Too Obvious:** The North and South fought the Civil War for many reasons, some of which were the same and some different.

**Better** (*This 'working thesis' provides a specific argument, but it still hasn't answered the 'how' and 'why' questions*): While both sides fought the Civil War over the issue of slavery, the North fought for moral reasons while the South fought to preserve its own institutions.

**Even better** (*This thesis provides a claim and states what evidence will be used to support this claim*): While both Northerners and Southerners believed they fought against tyranny and oppression, Northerners focused on the oppression of slaves while Southerners defended their own right to self-government.

**Too Simple, Too Obvious:** Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* is a great American novel.

**Better** (*This 'working thesis' provides a specific argument, but it still hasn't answered the 'how' and 'why' questions*): In *Huckleberry Finn*, Mark Twain develops a contrast between life on the river and life on the shore.

**Even better** (*This thesis provides a claim and states what evidence will be used to support this claim*): Through its contrasting river and shore scenes, Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* suggests that to find the true expression of American democratic ideals, one must leave "civilized" society and go back to nature.

*Thank you to the University of North Carolina's Writing Center.*

