

THESIS STATEMENT

What is and is not a thesis statement?

A thesis statement is the most important sentence in your paper. It is the main point that you are *arguing* in your essay. A thesis must be arguable (for or against) to be a thesis. (A thesis is not a fact nor an opinion).

The bulk of your essay is your *defense* of your thesis statement: the evidence you draw upon to defend the thesis statement (this is why a thesis statement is more than a mere opinion).

Another way a looking at the thesis statement is to see it as the thread that runs through the essay and links all of its parts together. Everything hangs on the thesis statement.

A thesis statement is *not* a title.

A title can often give the reader some notion of what the thesis is going to be, but it is not the thesis itself. The thesis itself, as presented in the thesis statement, does not suggest the main idea—*it is the main idea*. Remember, also, that a thesis statement will always be a complex sentence; there is no other way to make a statement.

TITLE: NOT A THESIS	THESIS STATEMENT
Home and Schools	Parents ought to participate more in the education of their children.
James Cagney: Hollywood Great	James Cagney was one of the greatest actors ever to appear in movies.
Inflation and Old Age	Continuing inflation makes it almost impossible to plan intelligently for one's retirement.
A Shattering Experience	My first visit to the zoo was a shattering experience.
The Fad of Divorce	Too many people get divorced for trivial reasons.

A thesis statement is not an announcement of the subject.

A thesis takes a stand. It expresses an *position* on the subject. It is not the subject itself.

ANNOUNCEMENT: NOT A THESIS	THESIS STATEMENT
I want to share some thoughts with you about our space program.	Our space program is a waste of money.
The many unforeseen problems I encountered when I went camping are the topic of this theme.	I encountered many unforeseen problems when I went camping.
This paper will attempt to tell you something about the emotions I felt on viewing the Grand Canyon.	The Grand Canyon was even more magnificent than I had imagined.
The thesis of this paper is the difficulty of solving our environmental problems.	Solving our environmental problems is more difficult than many environmentalists believe.

A thesis statement is not a statement of fact.

A thesis makes a judgment of interpretation. There's no way to spend a whole paper supporting a statement that needs no support.

FACT: NOT A THESIS

Jane Austin is the author if Pride and Prejudice.
The capitol of California is Sacramento.
Suicide is the deliberate taking of one's own life.
President Lincoln's first name was Abraham.
The planet closest to the sun is Mercury.

What a strong thesis is...

It's possible to have a one-sentence statement of an idea and still not have a thesis that can be supported effectively. What characterizes a good thesis?

A good thesis is restricted.

In certain respects, devising a thesis statement as you plan your paper can sometimes be a way in itself of limiting, or restricting, your subject even further. Thesis statements themselves, however, may not always have been sufficiently narrowed down. A good thesis deals with restricted, bite-size issues rather than issues that would require a lifetime to discuss intelligently. The more restricted the thesis, the better the chances are for supporting it fully.

POOR	BETTER
The world is in a terrible mess.	Trade barriers contribute to international tensions.
People are too selfish.	Human selfishness is seen at its worst during rush hour.
The American steel industry has problems.	The worst problem of the American steel industry is lack of funds to renovate outdated plants and equipment.
Crime must be stopped.	Our courts should hand out tougher sentences.

A strong thesis is unified.

The thesis expresses one major idea about its subject. The tight structural strength of your paper depends on its working to support that one idea. A good thesis may sometimes include a secondary idea if it is strictly subordinated to the major one, but without that subordination the writer will have too many important ideas to handle, and the structure of the paper will suffer.

POOR	BETTER
Detective stories are not a high form of literature, but people have always been fascinated by them, and many fine writers have experimented with them.	Detective stories appeal to the basic human desire for thrills.
The new health program is excellent, but it has several drawbacks, and it should be run only on an experimental basis for two or three years.	The new health program should be run only on experimental basis for two or three years. OR Despite its general excellence, the new health program should be run only on an experimental basis for two or three years.
The Columbus Cavaliers have trouble at the defensive end and linebacker positions, and front- office tensions don't help, but the team should be able to make the play-offs.	The Columbus Cavaliers should be able to make the play-offs. OR Even granting a few troubles, the Columbus Cavaliers should be able to make the play- offs.

A good thesis is specific.

A satisfactorily restricted and unified thesis may be useless if the idea it commits you to is too vague. "The new World Trade Center is impressive," for example, could mean anything from impressively beautiful to impressively ugly. With a thesis statement like "Hemingway's war stories are very good," you would probably have to spend so many words defining what on earth "good" means that there would be no room for anything else. Even when there's no likelihood of conclusion, vague ideas normally come through as so familiar or dull or universally accepted that the reader sees no point in paying attention to them.

POOR	BETTER
Hemingway's war stories are very good.	Hemingway's war stories helped create a new prose style.

Drug addiction is a big problem.	Drug addiction has caused a dramatic increase in crimes of violence.
Our vacation was a tremendous experience.	Our vacation enabled us to learn the true meaning of sharing.
My parents are wonderful people.	Everything my parents do is based on their loving concern for the welfare of the family.

Exercises for Review

I want to tell you about the many defects in the administration's proposals for restructuring the Social Security program.

Al Capone, the Chicago gang leader, was nicknamed "Scarface."

Justice delayed is justice denied.

My thesis asks whether affirmative action programs are just a new form of racism.

It's not only poor people who get government handouts.

How to Grow Prize-Winning Roses.

This paper will examine recent proposals to reinstate the death penalty.

My wife is an excellent cook.