

Developing Your Thesis

Writing a Thesis Sentence

No sentence in your paper is more essential than the thesis sentence. And with good reason: the thesis statement is typically **the ONE sentence in the paper that asserts, controls, and structures the entire argument**. Without a strong, thoughtful thesis, a paper might seem unfocused or weak.

So what makes a good thesis statement?

1. **A good thesis will make a claim.** This doesn't mean you have to reduce an idea to an "either/or" proposition and then take a stand. Rather, you need to develop an interesting perspective that you can support and defend. This perspective must be more than an observation; it must posit a perspective or make a claim.
2. **A good thesis sentence will control the entire argument.** Your thesis sentence determines what you are required to say in a paper. It also determines what you cannot say. Every paragraph in your paper exists in order to support your thesis. Accordingly, if one of your paragraphs seems irrelevant to your thesis you have two choices: get rid of the paragraph, or rewrite your thesis.
3. **A good thesis will provide structure for your argument.** A good thesis not only signals to the reader what your argument is, but how your argument will be presented. In other words, your thesis should either directly or indirectly suggest the structure of your argument to the reader.

The Six-Step Thesis Formation Method

1. **Name your focus topic.**
EXAMPLE: *The Beverly Hills Diet*
2. **Ask a question (make sure it's not obvious!) about your focused topic.**
EXAMPLE: *Is the Beverly Hills Diet advisable for the typical college student?*
3. **Revise the question into a declarative statement.**
EXAMPLE: *The Beverly Hills Diet is inadvisable for the typical college student.*
4. **Add a group of words summarizing your key ideas.**
EXAMPLE: *Because it is inconvenient, unhealthy, and provides only temporary weight loss.*
5. **Recognize the opposition.**
EXAMPLE: *Although it does provide quick weight loss.*
6. **Call upon editing to put it all together.**
EXAMPLE: *Although it does provide quick weight loss, the Beverly Hills Diet is inadvisable for the typical college student because it is inconvenient, unhealthy, and provides only temporary weight loss.*

Will this thesis sentence make the grade? (A Checklist)

- Does my thesis sentence attempt to answer (or at least explore) a challenging question?
- Is the point you're making one that would generate discussion and argument, or is it one that would leave people asking, "So what?"
- Is your thesis too vague? Too general? Should you focus on some more specific aspect of your topic?
- Does your thesis deal directly with the topic at hand, or is it a declaration of your personal feelings?
- Does your thesis indicate the direction of your argument? Does it suggest a structure for your paper?
- Does your introductory paragraph define terms important to your thesis? If you are writing a research paper, does your introduction "place" the thesis within the larger, ongoing scholarly discussion about your topic?
- Is the language in your thesis vivid and clear? Have you structured your sentence so that the important information is in the main clause? Have you used subordinate clauses to house less important information? Have you used parallel sentences to show the relationship between parts of your thesis?

What else do I need to know about thesis sentences?

1. **A good thesis usually relies on a strong introduction.** As your writing becomes more sophisticated, you will find that a one-sentence thesis statement cannot bear the burden of your entire argument. Therefore, you will find yourself relying increasingly on your introduction to lay the groundwork. Use your introduction to explain some of your argument's points and/or define its terms. Save the "punch" for your thesis.
2. **The structure of your thesis, along with its introduction, should in some way reflect the logic that brought you to your argument.** It's helpful when structuring your thesis sentence to consider for a moment how it was that you came to your argument in the first place. No matter what discipline you are working in, you came to your idea by way of certain observations. Reconstruct for yourself how you came to your observations, and then use this information to make your introduction and your thesis coherent.
3. **A good working thesis is your best friend.** Many students write their thesis on a post note and keep it in front of them to help control the direction of the argument. Those writers who understand the concept of "working thesis" are way ahead of the game.

** For more help see the next handout, *The Working Thesis Sentence*, on the wall outside the Writing Center!*

Working thesis statement

As you write your thesis statement and research your ideas, you will probably need to revise your thesis. That's okay! Revising your thesis can help you structure your research process and make writing your paper easier. This is why we refer to the process as a "working thesis statement"--it's a work in progress.

Revising the Working Thesis

Don't be afraid to revise! In fact, the most important quality of a working thesis sentence is its flexibility. A working thesis needs to keep up with your thinking. It needs to accommodate what you learn as you go along.

When might you revise the thesis?

- to help you clarify for yourself the direction of your argument (to either include your new ideas or accommodate a shift in your perspective);
- to restructure or reorganize your essay;
- or to better define the major terms in your thesis.

The working thesis need not be eloquent. In fact, it can be quite clunky, declaring your argument and then clumsily listing your supporting points. Not to worry: you'll be revising your thesis, and often more than once. Below are some questions to ask yourself as you revise your thesis.

What questions can you use to revise your thesis?

- What doesn't the thesis say? What does it need to say?
- Is your thesis clear?
- Does it present the logic and structure of your paper?
- Does it emphasize the points you want to emphasize?

As your very last step, revise to make your thesis eloquent and flow together.

- You will want to write a thesis sentence that evokes something in the reader. You will want to use language that has some power; you will want to structure the sentence so that it has some "oomph." Pay attention to diction, to syntax, to nuance, and to tone. In short, write a good sentence.