

Essay Planning: How to Develop a Working Thesis Statement

The Role of a Thesis Statement

The thesis statement is the heart of every paper. It is a focused statement that summarizes the main argument and broadcasts the order in which the ideas will be discussed. Thesis statements have three parts: the topic, the claim, and the major points. The claim is your argument, opinion, or stance that will be supported by your evidence and examples. You present the evidence in the list of major points. Examine the thesis statements below.

Stress in the fast-food workplace has led to *serious* physical, psychological, and emotional *problems* **for employees**.

Topic: Workplace stress for fast-food workers

Claim: Stress causes problems

Points: The paper will examine three areas: physical, psychological and emotional (to support the claim).

The Japanese automobile industry has been *invigorated by foreign competition*, which has *forced it to create more* economical production techniques and creative, targeted branding for its cars.

Topic: The relationship between the Japanese car industry and the foreign car industry

Claim: The outside car industry caused the Japanese industry to change.

Points: The paper will examine two areas: first production techniques and second branding (to support the claim).

In George Orwell's allegory, *Animal Farm*, he argues that *political power leads to corruption* as seen through Major's influence, the pig's philosophy, and political rivalry amongst animals.

Topic: The allegory *Animal Farm*

Claim: Political power leads to corruption

Points: The paper will examine three topics: Major's influence, the pig's philosophy, and political rivalry amongst animals (to support the claim).

Purpose of a Thesis Statement

Now that we have a better understanding of the three elements of a thesis statement, let's examine why thesis statements are crucial to a paper.

For a Reader

Thesis statements act as a roadmap that drive readers from one paragraph to another. Having a thesis statement gives the reader a “notice” on points that will be discussed in the paper. Moreover, having a thesis statement gives the reader a reason to continue reading. Without a statement to provide structure, readers would be left confused and disengaged.

For a Writer

When drafting your own paper, a thesis statement can help clarify your focus and help organize your paper. Your claim should be referred to throughout the paper, and your points can help structure the body paragraphs. In this manner, a thesis statement acts as a planning tool to organize your ideas. Keep in mind that while drafting your paper, your claim or supporting points can change; with it, your thesis statement should be updated as well.

For Different Disciplines

While thesis statements should contain a topic, claim, and points, these elements can be characterized differently depending on the discipline.

Literature: In general, literary thesis statements tend to be an *interpretive argument* (claim) with *evidence* (points). Keep in mind that claims in literature papers are “reasonable but contestable” (Hacker and Sommers).

Thesis Example: In Harper Lee’s novel *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Atticus Finch demonstrates that despite challenges, there is always good in humanity [INTERPRETIVE ARGUMENT] through justice, determination, and empathy [EVIDENCE].

Science: Scientific papers include the motivation for experiment, design of experiment, and meaning of results (Hacker and Sommers). Therefore, their thesis statement can be viewed as the *statement of objectives* and *statement of hypotheses*. Rather than a contestable claim, like in literature thesis statements, a scientific thesis answers the “why” and “so what” questions for choosing the experiment.

Example: Previous studies have found that for “both male and female Zebra Finches, orange leg bands (which are similar to natural leg color) proved to be of intermediate preference (Burley, 1981 and 1982)” (Writing Across the Curriculum, 2017) [BACKGROUND]

Thesis: Therefore, “the purpose of this study was to test whether or not this preference for certain colors of leg bands generalizes to preference for certain colors of nesting material. [STATEMENT OF OBJECTIVE]. It was hypothesized that zebra finches would collect more red or black material than light green, with collection of orange being intermediate” (Writing Across the Curriculum, 2017). [STATEMENT OF HYPOTHESIS]

Business: A thesis statement for a business paper is targeted to a *specific audience*, in a straightforward way, and delivers a *clear purpose* (Hacker and Sommers). It's important to keep the audience in mind for business writing because this is whom the paper is appealing to.

Thesis Example: This paper proves that a business lasts the longest if it has a strategic management policy [PURPOSE], developed by a team of expert business planners [AUDIENCE]. It also extends a leg to highlight how strategies support handsome revenue [PURPOSE cont.] (Management Writing Solutions, 2019).

History: In contrast to a contestable claim, historical papers observe the actions or words of individuals from the past. Therefore, a historical thesis statement identifies the *cause* and the *effect* of historical events. Rather than confirming what the reader already knows, a historical paper—and similarly its thesis—aims to change the reader's value on a historical event or matter (Hacker and Sommers).

Thesis Example: “The Immigration Act of 1965 effectively restructured the United States’ immigration policies [CAUSE] in such a way that no group, minority or majority, was singled out by being discriminated against or given preferential treatment in terms of its ability to immigrate to America [EFFECT]” (“Historical Thesis Statements”).

Characteristics of a Strong Thesis

While we’ve discussed the elements needed in a thesis as well as their purpose, it can still be hard to distinguish a thesis statement. Therefore, let's examine key characteristics that help identify what a thesis statement is compared to what it is not.

What a Thesis Is

Thesis statements *answer* the paper’s *prompt*.

Keep in mind that answering the prompt doesn't need a paragraph explanation. Rather, a thesis is a *specific* and *arguable* statement.

What a Thesis Is Not

A thesis is *not a question*. A prompt might ask you a question; however, leaving the readers with another question will avoid making a clear claim or argument for your paper (“Developing a Thesis”).

A thesis is *not a list*. While thesis statements can contain a list of points, they must always have a claim to support the points. Moreover, not every thesis statement needs a list of points.

Thesis statements *should not be vague, combative, or confrontational*. Avoid choosing words or claims that lend themselves to being judgemental rather than rational (“Developing a Thesis”). For example, saying that “everyone needs to fight against climate change” is a weak claim to a

thesis statement. The word “everyone” is vague and applies to all people of all demographics, and the word “fight” doesn’t clearly convey what actions need to be taken to enact change.

Thesis statements **cannot be value judgements**. Avoid making personal judgements of whether the topic is “good” or “bad.” For example, claiming that “monarchs are evil” is a value judgment. Since readers can interpret the word “evil” differently, it can lead to a weak thesis statement that is hard to argue.

A thesis statement is **not just a claim**. While claims are essential to a thesis, you should provide reasons that support your claim. A thesis statement is incomplete without supporting points that clarify the paper’s focus.

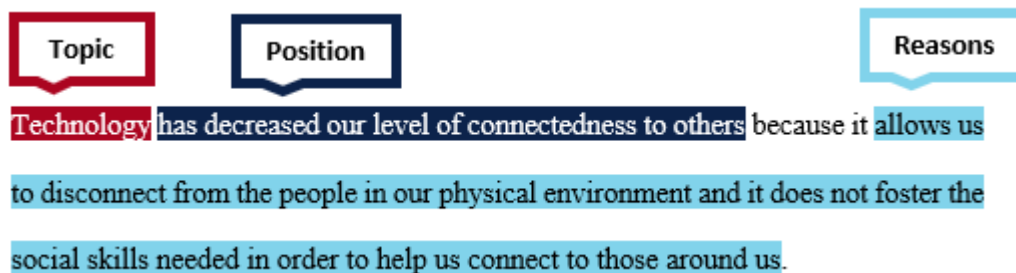
Type of Paper

In addition to different disciplines, we will look into three common types of papers and how their thesis statements can vary. As mentioned earlier, the topic, claim, and points are still relevant for thesis statements; however, you will see different terminology used to characterize the thesis statement depending on the type of paper. Moreover, keep in mind that some papers might require additional evaluations to explain the claim.

Argumentative

An argumentative essay requires you to take a position (claim) and justify it with evidence. In context to a general thesis statement, you can think of an argumentative thesis containing **a topic**, **a position** (claim), **and reasons**. Since this paper requires you to take an argumentative position, it may take more than one word to explain your reason.

Example:

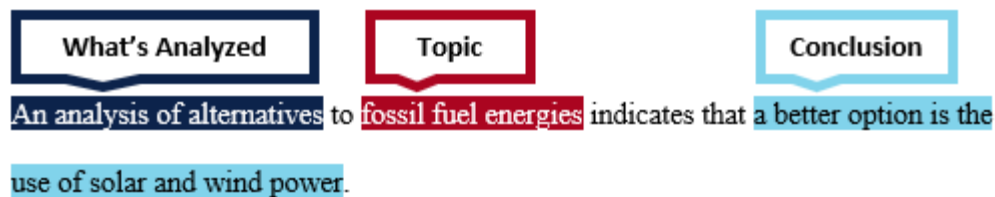


(University of Arizona, Writing Center)

Analytical

Analytical essays delve into an issue or idea and provide a conclusion or evaluation that results from the analysis. Therefore, an analytical thesis statement contains **a topic**, **what is analyzed**, and **a conclusion or evaluation** of what was found. An analytical essay warrants a conclusion or evaluation, meaning that instead of using points, you will often explain the result of your analysis.

Example:



(University of Arizona, Writing Center)

Expository

An expository paper explains a topic by describing related subtopics (points) to the reader. It's helpful to think of subtopics as key aspects that relate to your topic. Thus, your thesis statement should contain *a topic* and its *key aspects*.

Example:



(University of Arizona, Writing Center)

Activity 1: Thesis Activity

You will be presented with different thesis statements based on the four thesis categories that we discussed. Please identify which thesis statement is the most effective. Refer back to the “Type of Paper” section to get a refresher on types of thesis statements and examples of them.

1. Argumentative Essay Thesis:

- There shouldn't be any access to guns in the United States because they have the ability to inflict lots of pain on people.
- The United States government should prohibit the sale of guns because they provide a medium to cause death and are rarely used for self protection.
- The United States should ban guns for students, elders, and handicapped individuals.

2. Analytical Essay Thesis:

- The existing problem of racism lingers and is fueled by socio-ethnic discrimination.
- Racism is an existing problem that has impacts in the economical, socio-ethnic, and socio-political environment of the world.
- The result of the existing problem of racism is seen in the economical and socio-political aspect of the world. The socio-ethnic discrimination among people continues to play a primary role in fueling this problem.

(A and B from “Analytical Thesis Statement Examples for You”)

3. **Expository Essay Thesis:**

- a. Depression has not only mental effects, but physical effects too, including loss of motivation.
- b. Physical effects of depression include inconsistent sleep patterns, loss of appetite, fatigue, and headaches.
- c. Depression is often thought to only affect our mental health. However, research has found that physical effects are a key factor in making depression an exhausting experience because it can negatively affect someone's physical state.

4. **Discipline Related Thesis–Historical:**

- a. The relationship between the American colonists and the British government changed after the French & Indian War.
- b. The relationship between the American colonists and the British government was strained following the Revolutionary War.
- c. Due to the heavy debt acquired by the British government during the French & Indian War, the British government increased efforts to tax the colonists, causing American opposition and resistance that strained the relationship between the colonists and the crown.

(A, B, and C from “Historical Thesis Statements”)

Answer Key for Activity

1. b. In an argumentative thesis, we need the **topic** (“sale of guns”), **position** (“US government should prohibit selling them”), and **reasons** (“medium for death” and “rarely used for self protection”). Answer “b” has all of these characteristics and provides clear and direct reasons for our position.

Answer “a” takes a **position** (no access to guns in America); however, there is only one vague reason. Keep in mind a thesis should be direct and specific; the “ability to inflict pain” is a broad statement that does not give the reader an understanding about the paper’s direction.

Answer “c” also takes a **position** on banning guns, yet the reasons are related to the demographics of people (“students, elders, and handicapped individuals”) *instead* of a **reason** to support the position.

2. c. Option “c” is the only example that provides a clear **evaluation or conclusion** (socio-ethnic discrimination continues to be a primary role). Moreover, the first sentence identifies the **topic** (“racism”) and **what's analyzed** (“economical and socio-political”).

Answer “a” provides a solid explanation of the topic and what's analyzed; however, it has no mention of an **evaluation or conclusion**.

Answer “b” is a good example of an expository thesis statement as it provides a topic and key aspects. However, it once again provides ***no evaluation or conclusion*** about the analysis. Keep in mind an analytical essay should mention an evaluation because analysis is the prime focus of the paper.

3. b. An expository paper clearly outlines the ***topic*** and ***key aspects*** of the topic. Option “b” provides a clear topic (“physical effects of depression”) and provides key points about it (“sleep patterns, loss of appetite, fatigue, and headaches”).

Answer “a” provides ***a topic and a key aspect***; however, the topic is about a physical effect of depression, yet the key point (“loss of motivation”) is a psychological effect. Moreover, this thesis has only one point, making it hard to elaborate on in the following paragraphs.

Answer “c” provides a detailed ***topic***, but it touches on only one key aspect. Keep in mind that a thesis is a direct statement that should include ***key aspects or points*** that will be detailed in the following paragraphs. Mentioning a vague point such as “negatively affect someone's physical state” is not specific and results in an unclear thesis.

4. c. There is a clear ***cause and effect*** relation between the British government’s increase on tax and the American opposition to it. Moreover, option “c” provides effective context on the reason for increased tax. This context helps specify the actions that increased tensions between the American colonists and the British government.

Answer “a” provides a cause but ***no effect*** of a changed relationship. Moreover, the ***cause is vague*** because the word “changed” is used to indicate the relationship between American colonists and the British government; the word “changed” does not give any indication on a stance taken—we still don’t know if the change is positive or negative.

Answer “b” also provides a cause with ***no effect***. The cause is less vague than answer “a,” as the word “strained” indicates a negative relationship. However, there is still ***no effect*** of what this negative relationship did to either party.

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