

THESIS STATEMENTS

Every paper needs a main idea or **thesis** that the rest of the paper supports or proves. The thesis statement usually appears early in the paper, at the end of its introduction: it is then restated in the concluding paragraph. A strong thesis statement narrows your focus down to a position that promises to interest and inform your readers. In writing it, you are:

Focusing on one idea

You may have several things you want to say about your subject, but your paper must focus on one overall point. If you can connect your other ideas to that point, great! If not, you'll need to save them for some other paper.

1. **WEAK** This book was popular because it had an independent heroine, a strong moral message, and a happy ending.

(If these are really three unrelated issues, the writer will have to choose one. If both the heroine and the ending can be connected to the book's message, the thesis should focus on what they have in common.)

- BETTER** This book was popular because it had a strong moral message emphasizing the rewards of independence.

2. **WEAK** College students shouldn't have to take a required core curriculum, and many core courses are graded too stiffly.

(These are two different issues, so the writer has to choose one.)

- BETTER** College students shouldn't have to take a required core curriculum.

Narrowing your topic

Your point needs to be specific enough for you to explore it thoroughly during your paper. Avoid sweeping statements that cover large groups, areas, or time periods: they're hard to back up in detail and can rest on assumptions you may not have enough research to support.

1. **WEAK** The technological changes of the last hundred years have been amazing.

(This is a huge topic, covering everything from genetically modified foods in India to the Ipod. Choose one kind of technology or one perspective.)

- BETTER** Over the last 20 years, changes in technology have made a profound difference in the way American college students communicate.

2. **WEAK** People today aren't as patriotic as they used to be.

(This is too big a topic, and it also implies that you have a lot of specific information about exactly how patriotic people were in the past. If you don't, be very careful about any generalizations you make.)

BETTER The contrast between these groups of songs suggests that American teenagers today aren't as patriotic as they were in the 1950's.

Clarifying your terms

Your thesis should be as clear and precise as possible.

1. **WEAK** Gun control endangers ordinary citizens.

(The writer must identify what she means by gun control).

BETTER Laws requiring background checks and waiting periods for rifles and handguns are endangering ordinary citizens.

2. **WEAK** ISU needs better parking facilities.

(The writer needs to state what he's proposing.)

BETTER ISU needs to build an elevated parking garage on its lower campus.

Taking a position

Your thesis tells the reader what you've decided, after considering all the evidence. Instead of a statement of fact, it should be **arguable**--a claim that reasonable people can disagree with. After all, if you're just stating something that readers already know, then why should they read your paper?

1. **WEAK** Many thoughtful proposals for school funding have been made.

(The writer should say which proposal he is supporting.)

BETTER Idaho needs to put its 1% sales tax increase in a state-run education fund.

2. **WEAK** A vegetarian diet has advantages and disadvantages.

(The writer needs to say what side she ultimately comes down on. She should also find an angle on the subject that will prevent her paper from simply repeating a list of well-known facts.)

BETTER Older adults should consider the health benefits of a vegetarian diet.

3. **WEAK** Drunk driving is a serious problem with long-lasting consequences.

(Does anyone **not** believe that drunk driving is serious? Since all that's really argued about is how to stop it, that's what a paper on the topic should focus on.)

BETTER An offender's driver's license should be automatically suspended after a drunk driving conviction.

Sharing common ground

A thesis that's purely personal will quickly lose the interest of most readers.

WEAK U2 is my favorite band.

(First, this first statement isn't arguable: the writer knows her preferences better than the readers do. Second, why would the readers care? Instead, the writer should use her experience to tell her readers something they may find themselves interested in.)

BETTER The band U2 is popular in part because their songs connect spiritual and political themes.

Showing confidence

Your paper's thesis is your opinion about a topic you've researched and thought about. That's understood, so express your opinion with confidence! While it's fine (and often a good idea) to use words like "some" and "may" to make sure you're not claiming more than you can support, you should avoid unnecessary phrases like "I think" and "It seems to me." (Be aware, too, that many teachers object to phrases like "In this paper I will argue").

WEAK In my opinion, high school students will not be helped by an extra year of required math, although I may be wrong.

(Lose the "in my opinion"-- of course it's your opinion! And **never** include a phrase like "although I may be wrong" in your thesis: if you don't believe you're right, then who else will?)

BETTER Many high school students may not be helped by an extra year of math.

Making a contract

Many thesis statements combine a statement of the paper's main idea with an overview of how that idea is going to be developed. This statement is sometimes called a **sentence of division**, an **essay map**, or a **contract with the reader**, and it traditionally appears as the last sentence of a paper's introduction. For example:

Our current healthcare system is unworkable because it injures American industry's ability to compete overseas, because it allows insurance companies to make medical decisions, and because it leaves many people uninsured.

The "thesis" part of this sentence is simply "our current healthcare system is unworkable." Because the sentence goes on, however, the readers now know that the body of the paper will address three main subtopics in a specific order: (1) industry's healthcare costs, (2) medical decision-making, and (3) the problems of people without insurance.

You can usually choose whether to include a sentence of division or not--but once you do so, you have to follow it exactly. You can't follow the thesis sentence above with sections about (1) problems of people without insurance, (2) medical decision-making, and (3) overconsuming healthcare. So, if your draft doesn't match your essay map, you have two choices:

- You can move your paragraphs around so that they match the essay map, cutting out any sections that don't fit it and adding any that you've forgotten, or
- You can rewrite the essay map to fit what you've actually written. Much easier!

Practice

Identify any problems with the following statements and revise them if needed:

1. This paper will discuss the advantages and disadvantages of majoring in English.
2. I really enjoyed my vacation in California's wine country.
3. I am going to discuss the effects of radiation.
4. The cost of education rises every semester.
5. I believe that children today are forced to grow up much faster than they used to be, although that might not be true.
6. To really make sure no child is left behind, our schools need serious reform.
7. Every college student should learn how to manage money and raise a family.

Discussion

1. What position are you taking? Do the advantages outweigh the disadvantages, or vice versa? One possible revision: "Although English degrees rarely lead directly to high-paying jobs, majoring in English can help students succeed in any career they later choose."
2. You'll need to find something of more general interest to focus on. What made it enjoyable? One possible revision: "California's wine country has become a consumer paradise, offering wonderful shopping, dining, and leisure activities even to someone who doesn't drink."
3. What are you going to say about them? What point are you hoping to make? And what kind of exposure do you have in mind: Xrays? Bombing? Cancer treatment? One possible revision: "While many cancer patients dread radiation treatments, knowing what to expect can make the experience more bearable."
4. Yes, it does, and your readers already know it. What can you say that they **don't** know? (You may need to do some more research.) One possible revision: "The spiraling cost of health care is raising the cost of education every semester." Or, "To reduce the recent trend of tuition increases, ISU should impose a hiring freeze."
5. Cut "I believe." Cut "although that may not be true." Now, what do you **know** to be true? What does "grow up" mean, and what "used to be" are you thinking of? (In earlier centuries in the United States, most children left school for work in their early teens). Say exactly what you mean--and make sure your comparisons refer to a time you do know about. One possible revision: "Elementary-school aged children today are exposed to a more sexualized culture in terms of dress, toys, and television than their grandparents were even in high school." Then make sure your paper follows your essay map!
6. Ok, but what kind of reform? One possible revision: "To really make sure no child is left behind, we will need to go to a twelve-month school year."
7. You've got two good paper topics here: choose one or the other. Even though you could combine the two issues by discussing "life skills," doing so wouldn't leave you much room for the level of detail essential to a good paper. One possible revision: "Every college student should learn how to manage money."

Last Revised Fall 2009