

Guidelines for a Good Thesis Statement

Writing a paper without a thesis statement is like driving a truck without a steering wheel: you will end up going everywhere except where you want to go. What's a thesis statement? It's the sentence in which you state what the main point (*thesis*) of your paper will be. As you compose your paper, a good thesis statement helps you by keeping you headed in the right direction. And once your paper is written, a good thesis statement helps your readers by reassuring them that you know where you're going, so that they'll want to come along for the ride!

A good thesis statement is

- **a statement, not a question.** When you begin a writing project, you sometimes use a research question to focus your exploration, for example, "What role, if any, does music play in the development of an unborn child?" However, once you have discovered what you want to tell your readers, you express that main point as a statement, not a question.
- **one sentence.** A good thesis statement is concise, ideally only one sentence long. If you need more than one sentence to explain what you are trying to say, you are probably trying to say more than one main thing.
- **specific.** Question each noun, verb, adjective, etc. of your thesis statement. Suppose your thesis statement is "*Television violence affects children.*" Question each word. How can you make *television* more specific? You could say children's programming or nature programs or television news or reality shows. How can you make *violence* more specific? You could say gun violence or sexual violence or news footage from war zones. How can you make *affects* more specific? You could say causes anxiety or impairs psychological development or damages social skills. How can you make *children* more specific? You could say preschoolers or teenage girls or refugee children or children born deaf. Questioning each word of your thesis statement shows you options you may not have thought of before. Then, depending on the needs of the particular paper, you can decide which words you want to make more specific and which words you want to leave unchanged, broad. (Remember: in thesis statements, *always* avoid vague adjectives like *interesting, important, or dangerous.*)
- **narrow.** A good thesis statement is narrow enough to be covered thoroughly in the available paper length. The thesis statement for a ten-page paper can be broader than the thesis statement for a two-page paper.
- **blueprintable.** You can choose to structure your thesis statement as a miniature "blueprint" for your whole paper by listing in it, in order of their appearance, the main topics your essay will cover. Caveats: if you choose to blueprint your thesis statement, be sure you list the topics *in the order in which they will appear in the paper* and be sure no topics appear in the paper which you did not list in your thesis statement. And, as you can imagine, blueprinting works well only when you have a small number of topics, say, three to five. If you tried to list a dozen topics in your thesis statement, you would end up with the Thesis Statement that Ate Chicago. Here are two examples of equally good thesis statements, one blueprinted, one not. Without a blueprint: *In the past thirty years, old varieties of roses have become popular with American gardeners.* With a blueprint: *In the past thirty years, old varieties of roses have become popular with American gardeners for their hardiness, old-fashioned charm, and strong fragrance.*
- **usually at the end of your introduction.** Usually, the best place for your thesis statement is at the end of your introduction. You've grabbed your readers' attention; you've given them any background necessary for their understanding of your paper (for example, a definition of an important term); and now it's time to tell them what your paper is going to be about—to state your thesis.
- **original.** A good thesis statement grows out of a good thesis! Come up with an idea that seems original to you, something that you believe will be new and interesting to your readers. And you're on your way!
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