

Developing a Thesis and Crafting an Effective Thesis Statement

Developing Your Thesis

A thesis is the main idea that guides your entire paper. It should be:

Substantial: Your thesis should be a claim for which it is easy to answer every reader's question: "So what?" Why should they care about reading your paper? What meaningful insight will you be giving them?

Supportable: A thesis must be a claim that you can prove with the evidence at hand. Your claim should not be outlandish, nor should it be mere personal opinion or preference.

Precise: An effective thesis statement has been narrowed down from a very broad subject. Your claim should be appropriate to the length of your paper and should not be something on which whole books could be written.

Arguable: A thesis statement should not be a statement of fact or an assertion with which every reader is likely to immediately agree. (Otherwise, why try to convince your readers with an argument?)

Relevant: If you are responding to an assignment, the thesis should answer the question(s) your teacher has posed.

Preparation

Read (or re-read) your assignment and underline the "task" words, which are directions like analyze, describe, define, and compare. Be sure that you read the whole assignment: teachers often use more than one task word, and you'll want to be sure that you address them all.

If your paper is supposed to be based on one or more books or articles, review those texts. If you must do outside research and you have not yet done so, then that needs to happen first. A thesis must respond to what has already been said; otherwise, you will not know if your argument is original, relevant, or justifiable.

You will need to be able to summarize the authors' main ideas or arguments. Try using these sample sentences to articulate the authors' ideas:

The author believes _____ about _____ because _____.

The author shows us that _____ is true about _____ by presenting/describing/analyzing _____.

Finding Your Position

If your paper incorporates outside research, then you need to think about where you stand in relation to those other writers. Those published authors may have written very polished and persuasive essays, but you don't want to simply repeat what they have said, else your readers would be better off simply reading the original articles instead of your paper. How can you step out from the shadow of the authors who have written about this subject before you?

Luckily, the passage of time and your own personal experience can always expand upon what other experts have already said. Recent events might challenge, illuminate, or expand preexisting research. Applying those authors' insights to a new scenario, setting, or dataset might also provide new insights. Now that you've summarized what the authors have said in the previous section, think about how your thoughts align with theirs. Consider the following templates, where "X" is the author of one of your other sources:

X makes a strong argument that _____, but the argument would have been more _____ if X had also considered _____.

X may be correct in their argument that _____, yet I am concerned about the implications of this argument for the following reasons: _____, _____, and _____.

I agree with X up to a point, but I cannot agree with their conclusion that _____.

X's argument also has important ramifications for (some group of people or field of study that X doesn't mention in the article) because _____. Additional research should be done in this field to find out _____ and _____.

I believe that X's argument could be applied well to other settings such as _____, and by doing so we might learn _____.

I find X's argument of limited value because he did not consider _____, which would have made his argument more complex and _____.

Once you've figured out your relation to each of your sources, imagine that your topic is the subject of a conversation among several people: you, the author(s) of your text(s), and an average, intelligent person (i.e., your reader). What do each of these participants say or assume about this topic? Whose analyses, descriptions, or opinions are similar to yours, and whose are different? Try using these sample sentences to articulate your answers:

Most people assume _____ about [my subject] because _____. However, I think _____ because _____.

[One author] thinks _____ about [my subject], but [another author] believes _____ because _____. My position is _____ because _____.

Explain what is important or significant about your unique contribution to this conversation. Why is it important for your reader to consider what *you* have to say? What would happen if your position was widely read and accepted? What would happen if it wasn't?

Crafting an Effective Thesis Statement

The thesis statement crystalizes your unique position in a clear, precise, yet thorough way. A reader who has read only your thesis statement should have a basic understanding of what the overall point of your paper is. Try using these sample sentences to get started:

I want to describe/analyze/compare/categorize/define _____ to show my readers _____. I want to do this in order to persuade my readers that _____, which is important because _____.

Oftentimes, you will not know exactly what your thesis statement is until you have written the entire first draft. A thesis becomes more precise and complex as you explore your ideas through writing. Revising your introduction and thesis statement so that they match what your paper is actually about are often vital steps to take after completing a first draft.

Not a Thesis: In today's society, children are not allowed to vote.

Thesis: Children should not be allowed to vote.

Better Thesis: Children should not be allowed to vote because they are not mature enough to handle the responsibility of voting.

Best Thesis: Although Vita Wallace argues forcefully for children's rights, children should not be allowed to vote because they are not mature enough to handle the responsibility of voting.

What do you see wrong with the following thesis statements?

1. Frederick Douglass made a speech in which he wondered why slaves should celebrate the Fourth of July.

This sentence is a statement of fact. There is nothing to be argued here.

2. Of all examples of persuasive speaking in American history, Frederick Douglass's "What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?" is far and away the most interesting, persuasive, and important.

This sentence offers only the writer's opinion. The writer does not offer arguable criteria for why this speech is effective.

3. Douglass' speech is completely ineffective, since he admits that the anti-slavery position is self-evidently just and does not require argument. To be persuasive, speakers must always take positions which they and their speakers consider arguable.

This thesis makes an extreme claim ("*completely ineffective... must always...*") that the writer can probably not support with the assigned text.

4. Throughout history, brave leaders have stood up against oppression of all kinds.

This sentence is much too broad and maybe not even arguable. A more effective thesis would narrow the topic down to analyze a particular event from one leader's life.