

A *thesis statement* tells a reader how you will interpret the significance of the subject matter under discussion. Such a statement is also called an "argument," a "main idea," or a "controlling idea." Note that a thesis is an *interpretation* of a subject, not the subject itself. The *subject*, or *topic*, of an essay might be World War II or *Moby Dick*; a thesis must then offer a way to understand the war or the novel that others might dispute. A single sentence somewhere in your first paragraph should present your thesis to the reader. The body of the essay gathers and organizes evidence that will persuade the reader of the logic of your interpretation. Your thesis statement gives the reader a preview of the essay's purpose and goal.

"But," you object, "I don't want to give everything away right at the beginning. Can't I have an argumentative essay without announcing my position in the first paragraph?" Yes, you can, but the resulting essay is likely to lack focus. Keep in mind that an academic essay is not a mystery novel. Your reader does not want to figure out the plot, search for clues, or guess "whodunit." The point of an essay assignment is to demonstrate your thinking skills and your ability to keep a reader on the tracks of your train of thought. A strong thesis not only grabs the interest of your reader, who now wants to see you support your unique interpretation, it also provides a focus for your argument, one to which every part of your paper refers in the development of your position. A thesis keeps the writer centered on the matter at hand and reduces the risk of intellectual wandering. Likewise, a thesis provides the reader with a "road map," clearly laying out the intellectual route ahead. The best essays will begin with strong thesis statements.

"That's not fair!" you protest; "I've never done that before!" Yes, you have, but probably in a less formal context. Everyday life abounds with argument and persuasion. Remember when you wanted to convince your parents to let you have your own car? "Having my own car will give me more freedom to explore life, but it will also provide discipline through the expansion of my household responsibilities." You then granted that you would drive to friends' houses and to the beach, but you also pointed out how you could be relied upon to fetch Junior from soccer practice or to pick up dinner on the way home from school. First argument, then persuasion. The first thing out of your mouth was probably not "It's really important for me to have a car," or "I could take road trips!" The first is too vague, and the second is clearly not sensibly reasoned when you consider the parental audience. They are examples of weak thesis statements: if you used one of them as your argument, you probably spent a lot of time walking.

Always assume that your instructors expect you to write an essay that argues a position that you set out in a thesis statement, even if the question does not explicitly ask you to do so. Instructors often see this as a given, since the point of most assignments is to stimulate critical thinking. Occasionally, you will be asked to write a summary of a reading passage, or to jot down what you see in a painting, without providing any kind of interpretation. Such assignments are fairly rare, however. When in doubt, ask your instructor if a thesis statement is required; 99 times out of 100, it is. Whenever an assignment asks you to *analyze*, to *interpret*, to *compare and contrast*, to *demonstrate cause and effect*, or to *take a stand* on an issue, you are being asked to develop a thesis and to support it persuasively. (Check out our handout, [How to Read an Assignment](#), for more information!)

"But I'm no expert!" you continue to protest. "Sure, I can argue with my parents over a car, but I don't know anything special about *Huckleberry Finn* or the Civil War! How am I supposed to come up with an

pressure on yourself! Sure, it's unlikely that you will amaze your instructor with a radically new interpretation of a topic (although you never know!), but this isn't what you are being asked to do. You are being evaluated on the quality of critical thinking you demonstrate in the essay. Have you taken account of the evidence? Do you forge relationships between facts that broaden their significance? Do you *persuade* the reader of the logic of your argument instead of merely *assuming* it's obvious? Accomplishing these tasks in your essay is what will impress your instructor. (Still confused? Our handout, [Effective Academic Writing: The Argument](#), might help!)

"OK," you sigh, "so I need a thesis. How do I get one?" Ah, I thought you'd never ask...

How do I get a thesis?

You can't just pluck a thesis out of thin air. Even if you have a terrific insight concerning a topic, it won't be worth much unless you can logically and persuasively support it in the body of your essay. A thesis is the evolutionary result of a thinking process, not a miraculous creation. Formulating a thesis is not the first thing you do after reading an essay assignment. Let me repeat that: *deciding on a thesis does not come first*. Before you can come up with an argument on any topic, you have to collect and organize evidence, look for possible relationships between known facts (such as surprising contrasts or similarities), and think about the beneath-the-surface significance of these relationships. After this initial exploration of the question at hand, you can formulate a "working thesis," an argument that you think will make sense of the evidence but that may need adjustment along the way.

"You've got to be kidding," you say. "You mean I should start writing my essay with a thesis I might have to change? Won't that be a huge waste of time?" Hold on--a well-written essay is not the product of smoke and mirrors. You are involved in a thinking process, remember? That takes time. Writing is an act of thinking that's not predictable; you follow your best insights, guided by your working thesis but not constrained by it. If you suddenly see a new relationship while writing that hadn't occurred to you before and that really begins to make sense, what should you do? Include it, but leave the now faulty thesis as is and hope the reader doesn't notice? Exclude it, keep the old thesis, and carry your wonderful insight with you to the grave? Neither of these is a wise choice. You want your instructor to see your best work as a critical thinker, and that requires time for reassessment and revision.

Writers use all kinds of techniques to stimulate their thinking and to help them clarify relationships or comprehend the broader significance of a topic. For example, *freewriting* gives you the license to write nonstop for 15 minutes about anything that pops into your head about a topic. Once the 15 minutes are up, you go back over what you've written to see what kind of insights unexpectedly leap out at you. This often gets the creative juices flowing. If you are comparing and contrasting two events, you might make two columns on a piece of paper and write down everything you know about each event in the columns. Then, look back and forth between the two columns and see if anything unusual or unexpected or just plain *interesting* catches your attention. Formulate a working thesis, and see where it takes you. Reassess and revise your thesis. Reassess and revise your essay. Repeat as necessary.

How about some examples?

Why not? Since history and literature classes are notorious for demanding persuasive argumentative

of a weak thesis, a useful working thesis, and a strong final thesis. Suppose you are taking a course on 19th-century America, and the instructor hands out the following essay assignment:

Compare and contrast the reasons why the North and South fought the Civil War.

You turn on the computer and type out the following:

The North and South fought the Civil War for many reasons, some of which were the same and some different.

No kidding! So what? This weak thesis basically restates the question without providing any additional information. It is your job to do this right away. Sure, you will expand on this new information in the body of the essay, but it is important that the reader know where you are heading. Remember--you are not writing a mystery novel.

So, what kind of new information should you provide? The reader of this weak thesis probably thinks to herself, "What reasons? How are they the same? How are they different?" Ask yourself these same questions. Try to characterize the reasons ("I think slavery was the main reason Americans fought the Civil War," you might say to yourself). Begin to compare Northern and Southern attitudes ("The South believed slavery was right, and the North thought slavery was wrong"). Now, push your comparison toward an interpretation--why did one side think slavery was right and the other think it was wrong? You look again at the evidence and you decide the North believed slavery was immoral while the South believed it upheld their way of life. At the computer, you write:

While both sides fought the Civil War over the issue of slavery, the North fought for moral reasons while the South fought to preserve its own institutions.

Now you have a working thesis! Included in this working thesis is a reason for the war and some idea of how the two sides disagreed over this reason. As you write the essay, you will probably begin to characterize these differences more precisely. Suddenly your working thesis seems inexact or more vague than you had originally thought. Maybe you decide that, actually, both sides fought for moral reasons, they just saw morality in different contexts. You end up revising the working thesis into a final thesis that really captures the argument in your paper:

While both Northerners and Southerners believed they fought against tyranny and oppression, Northerners focused on the oppression of slaves while Southerners defended their own rights to property and self-government.

Compare this to the original weak thesis. See the difference? This final thesis presents a way of interpreting evidence that illuminates the significance of the issues raised by the question. If the essay supplies evidence and logical reasoning in support of this thesis, your instructor will be suitably impressed. *Keep in mind that this is one of many possible interpretations of the Civil War--it is not the one and only right answer to the question.* There isn't a right answer: there are only strong and weak thesis statements and strong and weak uses of evidence.

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For the best results, please use the following format for your thesis statement: *While both sides fought the Civil War over the issue of slavery, the North fought for moral reasons while the South fought to preserve its own institutions.*

class on the American novel:

Write an analysis of some aspect of Mark Twain's novel Huckleberry Finn.

"This will be easy," you think. "I loved Huckleberry Finn!" You grab a pad of paper and write:

Mark Twain's Huckleberry Finn is a great American novel.

Why is this a weak thesis? Think about what the reader would expect from the essay that follows: you will most likely provide a general, appreciative summary of Twain's novel. But the question did not ask you to summarize, it asked you to analyze. Your professor is not interested in your opinion of the novel, which she probably shares, or in your ability to retell its story, which she knows; instead, she wants you to think about why it's such a great novel--what do Huck's adventures tell us about life, about America, about coming of age, about race relations, etc.? First, the question asks you to pick an aspect of the novel that you think is important to its structure or meaning--for example, the role of storytelling, the contrasting scenes between the shore and the river, the relationships between adults and children, etc. Now you write:

In Huckleberry Finn, Mark Twain develops a contrast between life on the river and life on the shore.

Here's a working thesis with potential: you have highlighted an important aspect of the novel for investigation. It's still not clear what your analysis will reveal. What meaning does this contrast convey to the reader? Your reader is intrigued, but is still thinking, "So what? What's the point of this contrast? What does it signify?" You do not want the reader to have to figure out the answers to these questions herself. But perhaps you are not sure yet, either. That's fine--begin to work on comparing scenes from the book and see what you discover. Freewrite, make lists, jot down Huck's actions and reactions, etc. Eventually, you will be able to clarify for yourself, and then for the reader, why this contrast matters. After examining the evidence and considering your own insights, you confidently write:

Through its contrasting river and shore scenes, Twain's Huckleberry Finn suggests that to find the true expression of American democratic ideals, one must leave "civilized" society and go back to nature.

This final thesis statement presents an interpretation of a literary work based on an analysis of its content. Of course, for the essay itself to be successful, you must now present evidence from the novel that will convince the reader of your interpretation.

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Finally, let's look at a slightly different example. Sometimes an essay question asks you to take a stand on an issue. Maybe your history professor wants five pages on the following:

Was the New Deal of the 1930s a liberal plan to create a welfare state in America, or was it a conservative defense of American capitalism?

Questions like this one often ask you to take a stand on an issue. Maybe your history professor wants five pages on the following:

this type of question is, "Was the US justified in dropping atomic bombs on Japan in World War II?" Students may feel quite strongly one way or the other, but they must remember that passion about a topic must be supported with critical thinking in an academic essay. To return to our example, a student might turn on the computer after reading this question and write:

The New Deal was a conservative defense of American capitalism.

What makes this a weak thesis? Well, the author's position is certainly clear, but why does she hold it? Keep in mind that an assertion is not an argument! This weak thesis just repeats part of the question; it adds nothing to our understanding of the issues involved in making this judgment. A better, working thesis would include a reason for holding this position: "The New Deal was a conservative defense of American capitalism *because it* _____."

Perhaps you realize that questions like this one rarely have all-or-nothing answers, and your investigation of the evidence finds support for both positions. In this case, you might write the following:

The New Deal both defended capitalist economic principles and offered government assistance to needy Americans, making it conservative and liberal at the same time.

What makes *this* a weak thesis? After all, it takes account of the evidence and makes an argument, doesn't it? Yes, it does, but it's wishy-washy--it does not stake out a position. A critical thinker assesses the evidence supporting both sides of a question but must ultimately decide which way the balance of evidence tilts. A strong thesis presents the final statement of this act of critical interpretation. For example:

Despite its work relief elements, the New Deal is best understood as a defense of American capitalism because its main programs attempted to create a stable environment for private enterprise.

It's all there: position, argument, and attention to conflicting evidence. Again, this is not the "right answer," but if the essay that follows supports this statement with the logical use of pertinent evidence, it will be a *persuasive* answer and a successful essay.

How do I know if my thesis is any good?

Perhaps you face an essay question that isn't really similar to any of these examples. How do you know whether you have formulated an effective thesis statement? If there's time, the best strategy is to run it by your instructor or to make an appointment at the Writing Center to get some feedback. Remember, you must have some sense of how you will develop your thesis persuasively before anyone can give you a preliminary evaluation: always be ready to discuss supporting evidence and your reasoning when asking for feedback on a working thesis.

Even if you do not have time to get advice elsewhere, you can do some thesis evaluation of your own. When critiquing your first draft and its working thesis, ask yourself the following:

- "Do I answer the question?" This might seem obvious, but it's worth asking. No matter how intriguing or dazzling, a thesis that doesn't answer the question is not a good thesis! If you are being asked to "take a stand," do

selection is important, or do you state why you think it's *the most important when compared to other important events*? Re-reading the question prompt after constructing a working thesis can help you fix an argument that misses the focus of the question.

- *"Have I taken a position that others might challenge or oppose?"* If not, then you probably do not have a strong argument. Theses that are too vague often have this problem. If your thesis contains vague words like "good" or "successful," see if you could be more specific: why is something "good"; *what makes* something "successful"?
- *"Does my thesis pass the 'So What?' test?"* Also known as the "What's the Big Deal?" test, the "So What?" test asks whether your thesis presents a position or an interpretation worth pursuing. If a reader's first response is, "So what?" then you need to clarify, to forge a relationship, or to connect to a larger issue. Once a reader says, "Gee, this argument has the potential to broaden my understanding of the significance of this topic," then you have successfully passed this test.
- *"Does my essay support my thesis specifically and without wandering?"* Just as a thesis that doesn't answer the question ultimately fails, so does a thesis that isn't properly supported with evidence and reasoning. If your thesis and the body of your essay do not seem to go together, one of them has to change. Generally, this means revising your thesis to capture more precisely the argument in your paper. Remember, always reassess and revise your writing as necessary.

A thesis statement is an assertion, not a statement of fact or an observation.

- **Fact or observation:** People use many lawn chemicals.
- **Thesis:** People are poisoning the environment with chemicals merely to keep their lawns clean.

A thesis takes a stand rather than announcing a subject.

- **Announcement:** The thesis of this paper is the difficulty of solving our environmental problems.
- **Thesis:** Solving our environmental problems is more difficult than many environmentalists believe.

A thesis is the main idea, not the title. It must be a complete sentence that explains in some detail what you expect to write about.

- **Title:** Social Security and Old Age.
- **Thesis:** Continuing changes in the Social Security System makes it almost impossible to plan intelligently for one's retirement.

A thesis statement is narrow, rather than broad. If the thesis statement is sufficiently narrow, it can be fully supported.

- **Broad:** The American steel industry has many problems.

- **Narrow:** The primary problem of the American steel industry is the lack of funds to renovate outdated plants and equipment.

A thesis statement is specific rather than vague or general.

- **Vague:** Hemingway's war stories are very good.
- **Specific:** Hemingway's stories helped create a new prose style by employing extensive dialogue, shorter sentences, and strong Anglo-Saxon words.

A thesis statement has one main point rather than several main points. More than one point may be too difficult for the reader to understand and the writer to support.

- **More than one main point:** Stephen Hawking's physical disability has not prevented him from becoming a world-renowned physicist, and his book is the subject of a movie.
- **One Main point:** Stephen Hawking's physical disability has not prevented him from becoming a world renowned physicist.

You can revise your thesis statement whenever you want to while you are writing your essay. Writers often discover what their real purpose and point is in the process of putting their thoughts into words and then reading what they've written.

The Thesis Statement

This is not an exhaustive list of bad thesis statements, but here're five kinds of problems I've seen most often. Notice that the last two, #4 and #5, are not necessarily incorrect or illegitimate thesis statements, but, rather, inappropriate for the purposes of this course. They may be useful forms for papers on different topics in other courses.

1. The non-thesis thesis.

A thesis takes a position on an issue. It is different from a topic sentence in that a thesis statement is not neutral. It announces, in addition to the topic, the argument you want to make or the point you want to prove. This is your own opinion that you intend to back up. This is your reason and motivation for writing.

Bad Thesis 1: In his article Stanley Fish shows that we don't really have the right to free speech.

Bad Thesis 2: This paper will consider the advantages and disadvantages of certain restrictions on free speech.

Better Thesis 1: Stanley Fish's argument that free speech exists more as a political prize than as a legal reality ignores the fact that even as a political

prize it still serves the social end of creating a general cultural atmosphere of tolerance that may ultimately promote free speech in our nation just as effectively as any binding law.

Better Thesis 2: Even though there may be considerable advantages to restricting hate speech, the possibility of chilling open dialogue on crucial racial issues is too great and too high a price to pay.

2. The overly broad thesis.

A thesis should be as specific as possible, and it should be tailored to reflect the scope of the paper. It is not possible, for instance, to write about the history of English literature in a 5 page paper. In addition to choosing simply a smaller topic, strategies to narrow a thesis include specifying a method or perspective or delineating certain limits.

Bad Thesis 1: There should be no restrictions on the 1st amendment.

Bad Thesis 2: The government has the right to limit free speech.

Better Thesis 1: There should be no restrictions on the 1st amendment if those restrictions are intended merely to protect individuals from unspecified or otherwise unquantifiable or unverifiable "emotional distress."

Better Thesis 2: The government has the right to limit free speech in cases of overtly racist or sexist language because our failure to address such abuses would effectively suggest that our society condones such ignorant and hateful views.

3. The incontestable thesis.

A thesis must be arguable. And in order for it to be arguable, it must present a view that someone might reasonably contest. Sometimes a thesis ultimately says, "we should be good," or "bad things are bad." Such thesis statements are tautological or so universally accepted that there is no need to prove the point.

Bad Thesis 1: Although we have the right to say what we want, we should avoid hurting other people's feelings.

Bad Thesis 2: There are always alternatives to using racist speech.

Better Thesis 1: If we can accept that emotional injuries can be just as painful as physical ones we should limit speech that may hurt people's feelings in ways similar to the way we limit speech that may lead directly to bodily harm.

Better Thesis 2: The "fighting words" exception to free speech is not legitimate because it wrongly considers speech as an action.

4. The "list essay" thesis.

A good argumentative thesis provides not only a position on an issue, but also suggests the structure of the paper. The thesis should allow the reader to imagine and anticipate the flow of the paper, in which a sequence of points logically prove the essay's main assertion. A list essay provides no such structure, so that different points and paragraphs appear arbitrary with no logical connection to one another.

Bad Thesis 1: There are many reasons we need to limit hate speech.

Bad Thesis 2: None of the arguments in favor of regulating pornography are persuasive.

Better Thesis 1: Among the many reasons we need to limit hate speech the most compelling ones all refer to our history of discrimination and prejudice, and it is, ultimately, for the purpose of trying to repair our troubled racial society that we need hate speech legislation.

Better Thesis 2: None of the arguments in favor of regulating pornography are persuasive because they all base their points on the unverifiable and questionable assumption that the producers of pornography necessarily harbor ill will specifically to women.

5. The research paper thesis.

In another course this would not be at all unacceptable, and, in fact, possibly even desirable. But in this kind of course, a thesis statement that makes a factual claim that can be verified only with scientific, sociological, psychological or other kind of experimental evidence is not appropriate. You need to construct a thesis that you are prepared to prove using the tools you have available, without having to consult the world's leading expert on the issue to provide you with a definitive judgment.

Bad Thesis 1: Americans today are not prepared to give up on the concept of free speech.

Bad Thesis 2: Hate speech can cause emotional pain and suffering in victims just as intense as physical battery.

Better Thesis 1: Whether or not the cultural concept of free speech bears any relation to the reality of 1st amendment legislation and jurisprudence, its continuing social function as a promoter of tolerance and intellectual exchange trumps the call for politicization (according to Fish's agenda) of the term.

Better Thesis 2: The various arguments against the regulation of hate speech depend on the unspoken and unexamined assumption that emotional pain is either trivial.

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- opinions about the topic
- some reasons for your opinion and why other people might disagree