



# Center for Writing and Speaking

## E NO. 8 IN THE CENTER FOR WRITING AND SPEAKING HANDOUT SERIES

### Thesis Statements

*A thesis statement is the sentence stating the essay's argument. Usually located near the end of the introduction, a thesis narrows your general topic to a specific, focused argument which is supported by the evidence presented in the rest of your paper. A good thesis should answer the question, "What does this paper prove?"*

#### Thesis vs. Topic

One of the most common mistakes students make is confusing the thesis with the topic. Here are some examples of each to help make the difference clear.

**Topic:** school vouchers

**Thesis:** The implementation of a tax-funded voucher system would significantly harm the public schools and would not achieve the desired outcome of overall educational improvement.

**Topic:** interpretation of T.S. Eliot's poem "The Hollow Men"

**Thesis:** Eliot's replacement of the formal poetic restrictions of rhyme scheme and meter for the more natural sound of the speaking voice and the rhythm of the breath, along with his unconventional use of punctuation, express the fragmentation of values and the breakdown of coherent society in the aftermath of WWI.

**Topic:** democratic values in Karl Marx's writing

**Thesis:** Although many totalitarian regimes in history steeped themselves in Marxist ideology, a careful review of Marx's writing reveals a different understanding of "the dictatorship of the proletariat" and provides an inherently democratic vision of socialism.

#### Identifying a Good Thesis Statement

How can you evaluate the thesis of your paper? Here are a few important questions to ask yourself:

- **Does the thesis fit the scope of the assignment?** Don't try to prove something too broad or too specific for the length of your paper.
- **Can the thesis be reasonably argued against?** Trying to think of the opposing argument can strengthen your argument and test the importance of your thesis.
- **Does the thesis express one main idea that links together all of the supporting ideas in the paper?** You may have twenty important arguments in your paper, but your thesis should act as an umbrella, uniting the minor points under its shadow and showing how those ideas relate. Avoid simply listing your various points like a laundry list that merely points to each of your body paragraphs' topic sentences.

*Remember, even a good thesis may not fit the paper as it is transformed through revisions. Spend a good portion of your revision time making sure your thesis accurately represents what the paper says as a whole.*

# AGNES SCOTT



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## **Thesis Statements, Continued**

### **Developing a Working Thesis**

A working thesis is a rough draft of your thesis statement. It can help you in the prewriting stage to organize your thoughts in an outline. Once you begin writing, the working thesis can make your first draft more focused, allowing you to concentrate on style in later revisions.

- The first step toward writing a working thesis is to formulate a strong argument. Mapping out what you imagine your paper will cover can lead you to a sentence or two that articulates your ideas.
- Answer the question, "What is your paper about?" in one sentence, or try explaining it to a friend who doesn't know much about the assignment. If you feel stuck in the process of writing your thesis, just talking about your argument can help clarify your vision.
- Try writing a sentence that begins with "I intend to show" or "I will prove." This is not a final thesis, but it is a way to get your main ideas into one sentence. Once you can state your ideas, take out the "I intend ..." phrase and work on making the words represent your ideas as clearly as possible.

### **Revising Your Thesis**

Once you construct a working thesis, you have a foundation for revision. Since the thesis is the most fundamental sentence or group of sentences in your essay, its wording is particularly important. This does not mean you should aim for poetry; instead, work on writing a clear statement of your ideas.

- In many college essays, persuading the reader to agree with you lies in convincing them to interpret a book, article, or event a particular way. Does your thesis strongly suggest a compelling argument? Show that your essay topic is controversial or ambiguous; then take a stand.
- Ask yourself how and why. Instead of stating a general claim or opinion, look at the reasons behind an event and the significance of your argument.
- Stick to the most essential part of your argument. Adding in too many details can weaken the thesis by obscuring the main idea, and you have the rest of the paper to flesh out the other components of your argument.
- Make vague words and phrases specific. For example, instead of saying that a character is important, say that she provides the foundation for the narrative even though she is a minor character.
- Let someone else read your introductory paragraph, and ask them to point out your thesis. They should be able to recognize your main argument and have an idea of where your paper leads.

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