

How to Write a Thesis Statement

Most of us—even if we don't do it consciously—read and look early in an essay for one or two sentences that pose/announce the argument or analysis that is to follow. This announcement is the **thesis statement**, which usually tells us the author's stand on the issue.

Why should **your** essay contain a thesis statement?

- To provide your reader with a statement of your argument's main ideas.
Even if you're not writing an "argument" paper, nearly all of the essays you're assigned to write should state (early in your paper) your claim, something that you want to convince your audience to do or believe.

As you move through the process of writing, the thesis statement also helps you think through your ideas and how you want to present them to your reader. It helps you

- Test your ideas by condensing them to a sentence or two (your main point)
- Better organize, support and develop your main point

Almost all assignments, no matter how complicated, can be reduced to one question. For example, if your assignment is "Write a report to the local school board explaining the potential benefits of using computers in a fourth-grade class," turn that request into a question: "What are the potential benefits of using computers in a fourth-grade class?" After you've chosen the one question your essay will answer, compose one complete sentence answering that question: "The potential benefits of using computers in a fourth-grade class are..." [Actually, your thesis statement might take a more sophisticated form like "Using computers in a fourth-grade class promises to improve..."]

Here's a way to develop a thesis statement if the topic is not assigned. Let's say that you are writing for a social policy class about crack babies, babies born to mothers addicted to crack cocaine. Your readings have led you to the conclusion that not only do these babies have a difficult time surviving premature births and withdrawal symptoms, but also their lives will be even harder as they grow up because they are likely to be raised in an environment of poverty and neglect. You decide that in addition to programs for crack babies, the government should develop programs to help crack children cope and compete.

You might start with this try at a thesis statement:

Programs for crack kids.

This is not a thesis statement because your reader doesn't know where you stand—this fragment merely announces your topic. You might then write:

More attention should be paid to the environment crack kids grow up in.

This is not an elegant thesis statement because the terms *more attention* and *the environment* are vague. You try again:

Experts estimate that half of crack babies will grow up in home environments lacking rich cognitive and emotional stimulation.

This is not a thesis statement because it merely reports a statistic—it doesn't make an assertion.

Because half of all crack babies are likely to grow up in homes lacking good cognitive and emotional stimulation, the federal government should finance programs to supplement parental care for crack kids.

This example reveals four attributes of a good thesis statement, which usually:

1. Asserts your conclusions about a subject

Although in some cases an assignment won't invite you to state your conclusion, most do: take some sort of stand. Your conclusions about a subject, naturally, may change over the process of writing the paper. That's one reason teachers assign papers. In any event, remember that your thesis statement may be changed after you are well into your thinking on the subject. If your ideas about a subject change, revise your essay to reflect your new thinking.

2. Takes on a subject upon which reasonable people could disagree

Your thesis statement should justify discussion, that is, reasonable people should be able to disagree on the subject you're exploring. If your thesis is "My hometown is Des Moines, Iowa," your reader's response may be "So what? What's your point?" Similarly, a thesis statement like "George Washington was the first President of the U.S." is so uncontroversial that no one would dispute it or find it interesting.

3. Expresses one main idea

Your thesis statement should express one main idea. If it doesn't, then you run the risk of arguing one point at the expense of the other. Worse yet, you may find that your readers are confused about the subject of your paper. If you find yourself arguing two related but separate points, revise your thesis statement or make the relationship between your points clearer. Hint: a great many clear and engaging thesis statements contain words like "because," "since," "so," "although," "unless," and "however," words that indicate the relationship you see between your ideas.

4. Discusses a subject that can be adequately treated given the nature of the assignment.

A thesis statement like "World hunger has many causes and effects" cannot, plainly, be treated in five or even ten pages. The temptation is always to take on enormous issues in order to impress your readers. Instead, **restrict your thesis statement**, that is, reduce it to a more specific and manageable subject. Your thesis statement will, then, be easier to support in a relatively short paper (e.g., "Hunger persists in Appalachia because jobs are scarce and farming in the infertile soil is rarely profitable"). Remember: readers are more likely to reward a paper that does a small task well than a paper that takes on an unrealistic task and fails.