

THESIS STATEMENTS

THE BASICS

A thesis statement is a sentence or two, at most, which contains your stance on the topic and the main ideas you will cover. An effective thesis clearly communicates your essay's topic, how you will approach that topic, and what you will say about it. It is usually found near the end of the introduction. An essay should not begin with your thesis - your introduction needs to build up to the thesis. The thesis answers the question you are asking of your topic.

An effective thesis statement will have a number of characteristics. It should:

- answer the question you are asking about your topic
- be clear
- be concise
- be focused
- be debatable
- help organize the essay
- use keywords that attract the reader's attention
- convey the purpose of the essay
- convey the writer's stance or opinion on the topic of the essay

In order to communicate your main idea, an effective thesis should be clearly and accurately worded, with careful phrasing that makes your meaning apparent to your readers. It should be direct and straightforward, avoiding vague, abstract language and overly complex terminology. The thesis is the promise that a writer makes to the reader about the essay. It should not include unnecessary details that might confuse or mislead readers and make promises that your essay will not fulfill.

STRUCTURE OF THE THESIS

The basic structure of each thesis consists of a CLAIM (stance) supported by one or more PREMISES (reasons). In a very basic sense, consider the claim the conclusion you've arrived at, and the premises are the basic reasons why you have arrived at that particular conclusion. For instance, if you say (claim) that someone is frightened, you could justify that claim by saying that the person is screaming in terror and is running away as fast as possible (premises). This is also the same structure as an argument.

Thus our basic structure could be shown as follows:

<statement of claim> because <premise 1>, <premise 2>, <premise 3/more premises as needed>.

ex. Video games are an effective tool for learning <claim> because they develop motor skills <premise> as well as critical thinking skills <premise>.

The claim is that video games are an effective tool for learning. The premises are that such games develop motor and critical thinking skills in the players. It gives enough material to work with while limiting the scope of our inquiry - for instance, we know from this thesis that we are unlikely to examine every possible style or tool for learning, and won't be discussing the perceived negative effects of such games.

THESIS AND ORGANIZATION

An effective thesis provides structure for your essay's direction, emphasis, and scope. It should help

you visualize the most effective way to arrange your material and connect your thesis with your support. Ideally, it suggests how your ideas are related, in what order your major points will be introduced, and where you should place your emphasis.

For example, see how the following thesis statement conveys a good deal of information relevant to structure:

“Widely ridiculed as escape reading, romance novels are becoming increasingly important as a proving ground for many never-before-published writers and, more significantly, as a showcase for strong heroines.”

The claim and premises of this thesis might not be apparent at first. Is the claim that romance novels are increasingly important because of these reasons? Or is the claim that we shouldn't dismiss romance novels as escapist reading because of these reasons? There's a subtle difference in each of those claims.

From a structural standpoint, this thesis indicates that the essay will focus primarily on what the writer considers to be the two major new roles of the romance novel: providing markets for new writers and (more importantly) presenting strong female characters. The thesis also suggests that the role of the romance as escapist fiction will also be treated. The thesis statement even gives a possible order for the various ideas discussed.

From this thesis statement, the paper might be organized as follows:

Introduction

Discussion of romance formulas; general settings; plots and characters. Thesis: Widely ridiculed as escapist reading, romance novels are becoming increasingly important as a proving ground for many never-before-published writers, and, more significantly, as a showcase for strong heroines.

Body

Romance novels as escape reading
Romance novels as outlet for unpublished writers
Romance novels as showcase for strong heroines

Conclusion

Restatement of thesis. Review of major points; significance of recent trends in romance novels.

EXPLICIT versus IMPLIED THESIS STATEMENTS

For purposes of this course, you are being asked to write explicit thesis statements which clearly make your claim and state your premises for that claim. However, this is not the only way to create a thesis - indeed, if you look through most of the example essays in your textbooks, you will notice that their thesis statements are often less specific.

There is a reason for this, and it ties directly back to the section above about organization. Students in their first semester of college-level composition generally struggle with structure at first. By using an explicit thesis that states the claim and premises, it leads directly to an effective paper structure - by identifying your main points from the outset, it is easier to stick to those main points than you might otherwise.

This does not mean you cannot attempt to write more advanced (implied) thesis statements. However, in general those essays tend to be less effective because they demonstrate a lack of structure. The key is learning to create explicit thesis statements first, and then seeing how you can rework those after the paper is written.

DEVELOPING AND REVISING A THESIS

The process for developing a thesis takes you from a general subject area (e.g. smoking) to a much more narrow focus (e.g. the effects of smoking on adolescents). Otherwise, you can end up with something that is too broad to address in a 5 page paper, or even one of 10 or 20 pages in length. More importantly, it is helpful to develop a research question that your thesis will answer (e.g. “What are the negative effects of smoking on adolescents?”). Your tentative (and eventually your refined) thesis statement should be an answer to your research question.

The tentative thesis statement provides a preliminary idea of what you think your research will support. As you conduct research, it is quite possible for the thesis to change. Occasionally—especially if you know a lot about your topic—you may begin reading and writing with a thesis in mind. Most often, however, your thesis evolves out of the reading, questioning, and grouping of ideas you do prior to writing the essay.

It is still helpful to have something to start with. It provides sufficient focus to guide the first draft, but expect to modify it during subsequent drafts. As you read, write, and rewrite, a key source may not be available, a line of inquiry may lead to a dead end, or a lead you uncover in your research may encourage you to branch out in a new direction, emphasis, and scope. It stands to reason, then, that you will change and sharpen your thesis to keep it consistent with your paper’s changing goals. But whether or not you make major adjustments to your tentative thesis, it should grow increasingly more precise, eventually leading you to a thesis your research will support.

TOPIC, RESEARCH QUESTION, TENTATIVE THESIS, REVISED THESIS

The following examples illustrate this process (please note: the examples are not always the most effective thesis statements they could be. They provide basic illustrations for you):

Ex. 1

- **Topic**
The possible negative effects of computer games on adolescents
- **Research Question (RQ)**
Do computer games have any negative effects on adolescents?
- **Tentative Thesis (TT)**
Computer games interfere with adolescents’ ability to learn.
- **Revised Thesis (RT)**
Because they interfere with concentration and teach players to expect immediate gratification, computer games interfere with the ability of adolescents to learn.

Ex. 2

- **Topic**
The relationship between the feminist movement and the use of sexist

language

- **RQ**
What is the relationship between the feminist movement and the use of sexist language?
- **TT**
The feminist movement is largely responsible for the decline of sexist language.
- **RT**
By raising public awareness of careless language habits and changing the image of women, the feminist movement has helped to bring about a decline of sexist language.

Ex. 3

- **Topic**
The use of mood-altering drugs in state mental hospitals
- **RQ**
How has the use of mood-altering drugs affected patients in state mental hospitals?
- **TT**
The use of mood-altering drugs has changed the population of state mental hospitals.
- **RT**
It is the development of psychotropic (mood-altering) drugs, not advances in psychotherapy, which has made possible the release of large numbers of patients from state hospitals into the community.

The thesis you finally decide on should be consistent with the kind and amount of source material you have collected and the ideas you have developed in response to that material. It should not contradict your research.

Test yourself to see if you can identify the claim and premises in each thesis statement above.

Many students make common errors when trying to develop and state their thesis. Avoid using factual statements as thesis statements because a fact does not contain a stance, nor is it debatable. Facts should be used to support your ideas. Avoid using an announcement of intent, which is a "bald" or obvious statement in a thesis. In other words, do not begin your thesis by writing "In this essay I will argue...", "I believe...", or similar phrasing. Watch out for those phrases; while clear, they weaken the effectiveness of your writing and are generally unnecessary.

The following examples help show the difference between a subject, a statement of fact, an announcement of intent, and an actual thesis statement.

Ex. 1

- **Subject**
The Draft
- **Statement of Fact**
The United States currently has no peacetime draft.

- **Announcement**
In this essay I will reconsider our country's need for a draft.
- **Thesis**
While once the military draft may have been necessary to keep our armed forces strong, today's all-volunteer military has eliminated the need for a draft.

Ex. 2

- **Subject**
Intelligence Tests
- **Statement of Fact**
Intelligence tests are used extensively in some schools.
- **Announcement**
The paragraphs that follow will advance the idea that intelligence tests may be inaccurate.
- **Thesis**
Although intelligence tests are widely used for placement in many schools, they are not always the best measure of a student's academic performance.

Ex. 3

- **Subject**
Music Videos
- **Statement of Fact**
Music videos can enhance record sales.
- **Announcement**
As I will argue in this paper, music videos are an important part of our culture.
- **Thesis**
It may be true that music videos present stale images in place of listeners' original interpretations, but the shared images these videos show us play an important role in establishing a common culture.

Test yourself to see if you can identify the claim and premises in each one.

Writing Checklist: Identifying An Effective Thesis

- What is the claim of your thesis? On what premise(s) is the claim based?
- Does your thesis clearly communicate your essay's main idea? Does it suggest the approach you will take toward your material? Does it reflect your essay's purpose?
- Is your thesis more than a subject, a statement of fact, or an announcement of your intent?
- Is your thesis carefully worded?
- Does your thesis suggest your essay's direction, emphasis, and scope?
- Does your thesis help you organize your essay?