

Thesis Statements – Defining, Developing, and Evaluating

An effective thesis statement functions as a directional signpost, providing clarity and focused direction for the reader on a particular topic’s significance. *Dictionary.com* defines “thesis” as “a proposition stated or put forward for consideration, especially one to be discussed and proved or to be maintained against objections.”¹ The thesis statement moves well beyond a simple purpose statement or topic announcement and forms the basis of the paper’s argument, setting the tone, substance, and direction of the writing in the reader’s mind.

When composing a thesis statement, it is essential not to merely state the topic or purpose of the paper, but to put into words the main idea and primary conclusion that will capture the reader’s attention. The thesis statement is generally placed at the end of the introductory paragraph, though it can appear elsewhere, depending upon the composition category (see “Stage One” of “*Thesis Statement Development*” on p. 3). This foundational statement must be in the form of **a single, complete sentence that succinctly states the main subject of the paper along with the primary conclusion drawn from the research.** The thesis statement is analogous to a “movie trailer” that gives readers an engaging glimpse into the main conclusion, compelling them to read further. As research progresses and the broader topic is narrowed, the thesis statement must be continually developed, revised, and refined to achieve the greatest clarity and impact possible.

Big-Picture Thesis Statement Considerations

1. Write a complete sentence, rather than a phrase or clause that cannot stand alone.
2. Avoid simply making an announcement of the topic or explicitly referring to “this paper” (e.g., *This paper will examine a particular education theory.*)*
3. Eliminate first-person pronouns as part of an introductory narration of what you will accomplish in the paper (e.g., *In this paper, I will examine...* ’).*
4. State a claim or primary conclusion that will be substantiated in the body of the paper through supporting evidence. The thesis statement sets the literary stage for transforming assertions into arguments backed by evidence, while also anticipating counterarguments.

* *Be sure to refer to your discipline’s particular style guide, as some formatting guidelines allow this type of topic statement, as well as use of first-person pronouns, in specific sections of the paper. Also, read the assignment instructions and rubric carefully for additional guidance in these areas.*

¹ <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/thesis> **

**Please note that this document and any footnoted or parenthetical reference entries of source material are not formatted according to a specific writing style. Citations, reference entries, or MS Word settings should not be duplicated for use in academic submissions. Refer to your discipline’s particular writing style guidelines to comply with requirements.

(Excerpt below from *Introduction to Graduate Writing, Second Edition*, Liberty University Graduate Writing Center, Dr. Emily Heady, Copyright © 2007, 2013 All rights reserved.)**

All papers should have a thesis statement. Depending on the type of paper, the thesis may be more or less argumentative, more or less personal, and more or less risky. However, all papers should have a unified point or main idea that they want to discuss in a fresh, insightful way. The strength of your thesis will in many ways determine the strength of your paper, so learning to write a good thesis is very important if you want to succeed as a scholar.

Effective thesis statements...

- Are **clear and concise**: They say what they mean in a way that readers can understand. They do it as quickly as possible, and they do it forcefully.
- Set the course of your paper: A good thesis will launch the rest of the paper. It is **the major claim that the rest of your paper will prove, discuss, or amplify**. If your thesis is even slightly off topic, your paper will suffer.
- Appear at the beginning or the end of your introduction: **Usually the best place for the thesis is at the end of your introductory paragraph** (in short papers) or at the **end of your introductory section** (in longer papers). These are two of the most important places in your paper. Thus, it makes sense to put a thesis there.
- **Must be proven** (i.e., are claims—not facts or evidence): Thesis statements should be slightly risky—or at least should require more discussion to be fully convincing. Otherwise there is no point in writing your paper!
- Are echoed and **referred to throughout your paper**: Your topic sentences throughout the paper should refer back to, further explain, and elucidate your thesis statement.
- Are the product of much drafting and much analysis: You will likely not write a good thesis statement in your first or even second draft of a paper. Often you will find that you will not know exactly how or what you want to argue until you have almost completed your analysis. That's okay! **Revise your thesis as you go**, and your paper will show the benefits of your recursive thinking.

Developing Thesis Statements

Effective thesis statements are the product of good critical thinking. Rarely do they emerge fully formed in an early draft of a paper. Rather, they are the product of much research, reasoning, and revision. Nevertheless, some steps can be taken to make the process of writing a thesis statement easier.

Step One: Reading

Read your assignment over and over again until you have a good sense of its goals and purposes. Once you know what sort of assignment you are doing, you will know the sort of

thesis you should have. If your assignment is to write a summary, for instance, it makes sense for your thesis to look something like this: “In X article, Y author argues that...” By contrast, if you are writing up your findings after you’ve completed a study, your thesis should explain what the main thing was that you found, learned, or demonstrated. If you need examples of similar assignments, ask your professor.

Step Two: Research

In the sciences and social sciences, research tends to be of two types: qualitative and quantitative. In other fields such as English or history, however, it is more meaningful to discuss research in terms of source materials—primary versus secondary sources, archival sources, or theoretical sources. You may not know what sort of research you should do when you start an assignment, but you should at least know what sorts of issues and questions you are interested in discussing. Then, as you begin investigating your topic, your research methodology should begin to emerge on its own.

1. **Formulate a research question**—a topic you want to know more about and that is of an appropriate size for the assignment.
2. **Ask your professor for feedback** on the question.
3. **Connect with a research librarian for source recommendations**. Get those sources, and then read all relevant material that those sources cite.
4. **Use LU’s databases and library resources** to produce other information you might find helpful.
5. During your reading of the research, **capture relevant material** (and citation information) that either supports or challenges the thesis statement.

Step Three: Reasoning

Once you have completed your research and reading, carefully review everything you have captured and look for patterns and essential points that you determine are critical to include in your paper. Write these down. Then the thinking and reasoning process begins. Keeping the assignment guidelines in mind, work to connect the information you have to your own ideas in ways that make logical sense and that demonstrate your mastery of the material you discuss.

Heady, E. (2013). *Introduction to graduate writing* (2nd ed.). Liberty University.

Thesis Statement Development in Stages

Stage One: Thesis Idea

The writing topic to be explored in the paper can be thought of as the “thesis idea” in the initial stage of developing the thesis statement. Before research begins on the topic, several critical factors impact the drafting of an effective thesis statement. Key questions connected to these factors must be answered in the writer’s mind before the thesis idea can progress to the first draft of an actual thesis statement. Once answered, the writer then begins to research information on the thesis idea, which begins the process of clarifying the idea and narrowing the broader

topic. Knowledge gained through the research determines the specific angle to be taken on exploring the broader topic. This process brings the thesis statement more sharply into focus.

Again, first consider those critical factors impacting the development of an effective thesis statement:

1. In what **composition category** does the writing belong? (research paper, book review, report, case study, discussion post, essay, group presentation, meeting report, journal article, etc.) The stages of thesis statement development described in this section apply largely to academic **research papers**, though the principles are relevant to other composition types, with a few adjustments related to the unique requirements of the specific writing type.

a. A book/article review or report is generally a straightforward composition, averaging under 10 pages in length. It is commonly used to either inform or evaluate the content or author's intention in a book/article, rather than persuade the reader. A review is often written assuming that the reader has not read the material. Writing the thesis statement for a review is simplified due to the informative nature of the composition. Often, the reader approaches the review with a clear expectation of the review's purpose. In preparing to write a thesis statement for a review, the writer must first accurately identify and understand the author's own thesis statement and the degree to which it was accomplished in the writing itself. The objective of the review's thesis statement is to summarize the main topic of the book/article and offer a glimpse of its strong and weak points. Because a review often shares the writer's reactions and perspective, the use of first-person pronouns may be acceptable in a reflection section of the review, though be sure to refer to the assignment instructions or confirm with the professor if unsure.

b. In a research case study, the writer's intent generally centers around informing the reader on a topic, evaluating specific data, and then drawing conclusions to support a **hypothesis** (thesis) or to persuade the reader toward a certain viewpoint. The hypothesis that guides the case study will not be successful without specific research questions, reliable research, and justifiable conclusions, based on supporting evidence. Therefore, the most effective and accurate revision of the thesis statement may not be finalized until completion of the case study itself. It is acceptable to specify a primary hypothesis for the case study, followed by several effective research questions to be tested and evaluated for the purpose of proving the hypothesis.

c. Discussion board posts are generally shorter compositions with specified word-count limits. As with other writings, discussion posts, contain thesis statements that serve to inform, evaluate, persuade, or accomplish other objectives. If there is a stated word-count limit for the post, the effectiveness of each word written becomes that much more critical in accomplishing the stated purpose of the thesis statement. Therefore, it must be concise and yet engaging enough to lead the reader into and through the discussion. For this

reason, the thesis statement is often placed at the beginning of the post to capture the reader's attention from the outset.

2. What is your **tone** in this writing? (formal, informal, academic, non-academic, professional, poetry, narrative, instructive, counseling, coaching, etc.)
3. What kind of **audience/reader** is involved? (academic, professional, informal/personal, artistic, etc.)
4. What is the **length and depth** of the composition? (300 words, five pages, 20 pages, 40 pages, one chapter of a book, etc.)
5. What is your **intent** for this composition? (inform, evaluate, persuade, motivate, etc.) Sample thesis statements based on intent:
 - a. **Inform:** *The holidays and feasts detailed in the Old Testament reflect messianic, prophetic, and symbolic meanings directly connected to the attributes of God.*
 - b. **Evaluate:** *The holidays and feasts described in the Old Testament hold slightly different meanings and symbolisms based on one's religious denomination and the method of interpretation.*
 - c. **Persuade:** *The holidays and feasts documented in the Old Testament reveal spiritual meanings and applications that hold as much relevance for today's Christians as they did for God's chosen people in the OT.*
 - d. **Motivate:** *Faithful Christians will benefit directly from the study of the Old Testament holidays and festivals due to the key spiritual concepts and lessons symbolized in the themes of the Jewish holidays.*

Stage Two: Initial Draft of Thesis Statement

As the research progresses, patterns likely emerge as to which specific points of the broader topic receive the most scholarly discussion in the source material. Decisions can then be made as to which one of those points shall become the singular focus of the first pass at writing the initial thesis statement drawn from the thesis idea.

When clear patterns in the research cannot be discerned, a second approach to formulating the initial thesis statement requires speculation about which aspect of the broader topic has sufficient documented research for and against that specific point. If there is sufficient source material in favor of the argument proposed in the thesis idea, then the initial thesis statement can be drafted with the supporting research in mind. The initial thesis written may still be broad enough to reflect the larger topic under discussion but specific enough to focus on a particular aspect of that topic to explore and discuss in the paper.

Stage Three: Final Thesis Statement

With an effective initial thesis statement drafted for the writing, more in-depth research and examination of the source materials are completed. During this process, continual refinement of the thesis statement takes place to achieve even sharper focus. The revision process during the research ultimately yields the final thesis statement that will be woven into the introduction of the paper. This final thesis statement can then be further subdivided into narrower segments to help develop an outline for the paper, establishing the framework for the entire paper.

Practice Exercise: Evaluating Thesis Statements

Evaluate the following thesis statements as **E**ffective (the thesis statement makes a specific, focused point), **N**eeding work (with some revision the statement could be effective), or **I**neffective (should likely be discarded and rewritten).

1. Communism and socialism are destructive and should be abandoned. ____
2. William Shakespeare wrote "Hamlet." ____
3. Individualism and patriotism heavily influence much of nineteenth-century American literature. ____
4. Although lumber mills certainly dominated the American frontier, the early landscape of the United States was dramatically altered by the introduction of the railroad. ____
5. After a thorough study and examination of the trochaic octameter in Edgar Allan Poe's 1845 poem "The Raven," we can see how the rhythm of each line contributes to the overall meaning of letting go in the poem. ____
6. The Wailing Wall of Jerusalem's Temple Mount is believed by some to be the remnant of Herod's western wall. ____
7. After my experiences in Israel, I was able to view my life in a different light. ____
8. Each person's role in democracy is very important. ____
9. In the United States, the federal government should yield specific tax-crediting powers to state and local governments in order to more effectively administrate healthcare services and medical insurance. ____
10. The federal government should yield power to administer tax credits for healthcare. ____

Answers

1. *I: This statement, based on extreme beliefs, forms an absolute claim, which is ineffective as a thesis statement.*
2. *I: Factual statements are not acceptable thesis statements.*
3. *N: The thesis should focus specifically on how these ideals were reflected in which writings of this time period.*
4. *E: This is a well-focused thesis statement.*
5. *E: This is a well-focused and highly specific thesis statement.*
6. *N: A factual statement could become an effective thesis statement if the writer were to actually take a position and avoid tentative phrasing such as "believed by some."*
7. *N: Revision of this vague statement into a thesis requires focusing on specific experiences in Israel and incorporating meaningful details and specific effects from the experience in Israel to replace "different light."*
8. *I: The vagueness of "very important" communicates very little to the reader.*
9. *E: The writer provides specific examples of both the delegated powers and the accruing benefits.*
10. *N: The statement does not specify who should have the power or what aspect of healthcare will benefit. Adding detail would improve the sentence's effectiveness as a thesis.*