

THESIS STATEMENTS

What is a thesis?

The thesis statement is one of the (if not *the*) most important parts of your paper. It should be introduced in the first paragraph and serve as the focus of your analytic argument. The thesis is the thread (a strong one!) that ties together your interpretations of all the significant moments, patterns, developments, changes, and/or contradictions that you will develop in the body of your paper. Think of the thesis statement as a contract between you (the writer) and the reader. The thesis makes certain promises to your reader; it then becomes your job to fulfill that promise using specific details or analysis. The more specific your promise, the easier it will be to find specific evidence to support your argument.

This sheet offers *general* guidelines on writing thesis statements, but it's important to remember: thesis statements are NOT formulas, and a successful one cannot be reduced to its parts. Successful theses provoke thought, they read beautifully, they provide analysis of an idea or event, and they consider a *specific* issue.

Your thesis should include three components: WHAT, HOW, and WHY

WHAT—claim about event or historical topic

HOW—the events, ideas, sources, etc. that you choose to prove your claim

WHY—the significance of your idea in terms of understanding the history/narrative as a whole
(answers the dreaded “so what?” question)

Example: **The experiences of tribal groups who inhabited the Old Northwest and who relocated to territories west of the Mississippi River from the late 1700s to the 1860s offer new perspectives on the subject of Indian removals.** Rather than an organized removal of tribes under the legislation and direction of the federal government, the movements of Indian populations in the nineteenth century encompassed an expansive timeline, fractured and scattered journeys, and extensive participation by a variety of actors whose presence and attitude *serve to complicate a seemingly smooth narrative of American expansion.*

Please note:

1. A thesis can be (and probably should be) more than one sentence.
2. The part of the thesis in plain text (“Rather than an organized removal of tribes under the legislation and direction of the federal government”) is a potential contradiction to your argument; a strong thesis usually addresses a potential opposing viewpoint. This ability to imagine and answer an opposing viewpoint ensures that your thesis is *arguable*.
3. A good thesis should address these three questions of what? how? and why? in some way. Most students have trouble answering the “so what?” question for their thesis; it is answering this question that makes your argument relevant to the historical context. Be careful, though, that your answer to the “so what?” question is not a generalization “about the world we live in, or life in general”; it should be SPECIFIC and justify why and how your argument is significant to the historical narrative.

Where can I get a good thesis statement?

In a crunch, use the Magic Thesis Statement (but adapt it!): By looking at **HOW** (evidence to prove the claim), we can see WHAT (your claim about the text), and this is important because **WHY**.

Some Problems with Thesis Statements

The plot summary thesis:

The Confederate soldiers gave up their weapons after General Lee surrendered to General Grant.

Proving the universal:

The U.S. Civil War was a conflict between the North and the South.

The overly general thesis:

The U.S. Civil War demonstrated that war could be very bloody. [Note: if you can plug another subject/topic into your thesis, your thesis is probably too general.]

The cliché thesis:

The U.S. Civil War proved that war is hell.

The list thesis:

The death of civilians, the destruction of cities, and the devastation of countrysides showed the extent to which the U.S. Civil War severely damaged the entire nation. [Nothing technically “wrong” with this thesis, but it’s really boring! This is a great place to *start* with a thesis statement; then expand and/or finesse the what? how? and why? components.]

The reader-response thesis (as an unhelpful way of dealing with the “so what?”):

Bell Irvin Wiley, in *The Life of Johnny Reb*, shows how the common soldier dealt with the war to get the reader to understand that the war was about more than politics and politicians. [All texts are addressed somehow to readers. This is not an analytical point.]

Successful thesis:

In both its geography and its brutality, the U.S. Civil War remains vastly different from other conflicts experience by Americans in the past three centuries. Specifically, the widespread impact of the war on the citizenry, the economy, and the landscape proves that the importance of the Civil War lies as much on the home front as it does on the battlefield.

Why is it successful?

- It’s specific.
- It addresses a potential contradiction and is arguable.
- It provides a logical way to structure the argument.
- It’s fairly daring intellectually and has an interesting “so what?”
- Can you identify the various components?