

THESIS STATEMENTS

Formulating a thesis statement is a challenge for many writers. The following information may help.

A thesis statement ...

- is a single complete sentence
- appears near the beginning of the paper (often at the end of the introductory paragraph)
- indicates a paper's topic AND makes a single point or claim about that topic
- is sufficiently narrow to be supported effectively in the number of pages available

A thesis statement IS NOT...

- a purpose statement

A purpose statement simply announces the intent, scope, and direction of the paper, whereas a thesis statement must make a claim or argument.

- a statement of obvious facts

If readers are likely to understand and agree with the statement immediately, what's the point in crafting a careful argument to persuade them? A thesis statement must make an assertion that a reader might reasonably oppose or challenge.

- merely the author's opinion

A thesis statement should suggest that the author has thought carefully about the topic and developed an opinion about it that the paper will defend with evidence.

- an announcement

Avoid writing a thesis statement that begins with "I believe that..." or "I want to explain..." or "This paper is about".... Instead, just say what you have to say.

The working thesis statement

Frequently, writing the thesis statement is the initial step in drafting a paper; however, as research and writing progress, the thesis may be refined or revised. As you begin to write, consider your thesis statement a *working thesis statement*. That is, recognize that as you develop your argument in the body of the essay, you find that you need to modify your thesis to reflect accurately the argument you are making. Such modifications are a normal part of the writing process, indicating that you are learning from that process— which is the whole point!

COMMON PROBLEMS WITH THESIS STATEMENTS

1. The thesis is obvious, uncontroversial, or simply factual. Examples:

- *The holocaust was a tragic episode in European history.*
- *The process of osmosis involves a semipermeable membrane.*
- *Western governments must remain vigilant in their efforts to combat terrorism.*

To all of these statements, a reader might reasonably respond, “No kidding!”

2. The thesis is vague.

- *The growth of the European Union has sparked much debate.*
- *In their discussion of the environmental consequences of reliance on nuclear power, there are many similarities between the Kozlowsky’s argument and the position taken by Menand.*
- *The implementation of new energy policies is fraught with difficulty.*

Debate about what? Among whom? What kinds of similarities? What specific difficulties? A good thesis statement is *specific*.

3. The thesis is too broad to be addressed comprehensively in just a few pages. Examples:

- *Leonardo da Vinci, an icon of the Italian Renaissance, personified the intellectual awakening characteristic of the period.*
- *Mark Twain’s work reflected and commented on the technological innovations of his time.*

Whole books have been written on these topics; no college essay could possibly address them adequately. Be sure you can fully support your argument in the number of pages allowed.

4. The thesis is too detailed. Example:

Communication is the most important aspect of language learning, as learners only learn to use expressions and grammatical constructions correctly when they communicate and use these constructions actively. A practical understanding of a wide range of expression can only be attained by means of communication, never by methodically learning grammar.

The main point here seems to be that one cannot learn a language by studying grammar, but the writer has included all sorts of information (e.g., about how and when people learn grammatical constructions) that belongs in the body of the paper, making the thesis far too long and involved.

5. The thesis addresses multiple issues or makes more than one argument. Example:

With increasing immigration,, the question of how to accommodate a variety of cultures is becoming more urgent, and society is confronted with the challenge of educating students with a variety of native tongues.

A single essay might address either the challenges of accommodating multiple cultures or the problems of educating children who grow up speaking a range of languages, but not both. Be sure your thesis focuses on just one topic.