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What is a Thesis Statement?

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One of the most important components of most scientific papers, whether essay or research paper, is the thesis statement.

A thesis statement is a sentence that states what you want your paper to show, what you want to convince your readers of after having read your thesis.

This is the foundation of the entire work and informs the reader exactly what you wish to achieve with the paper, and what you wish to prove or disprove.

Unless you are documenting research or writing a purely descriptive essay, you will be basing the paper around this thesis statement, so it needs to be well thought out.



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What is a Thesis Statement For?

If an assignment asks you to analyze, argue, compare and contrast, establish a cause or otherwise interpret, the chances are that you will need to base it around a clearly defined thesis statement.

This sets out your position, and every part of the paper will need to refer to back to it in some way.

The Four Keys to Writing a Good Thesis Statement

1. **Assertive:** Your thesis statement must state exactly what you intend to prove with the paper. While your conclusions can be cautious, your thesis statement should preferably be strong.
2. **Singular:** The thesis statement, in most cases, should contain only one clear idea, keeping the paper focused.
3. **Specific:** The thesis statement should be as specific as possible, whilst making your stance clear. One sentence is enough for shorter papers.
4. **Well-positioned:** It should be included in the introduction, in most cases at the very end.

1. Assertive

Tell the Reader What You Intend to Prove

Knowing what you are trying to achieve, and committing it to paper, can be difficult. Writing the actual thesis statement can be one of the most daunting aspects of the essay. You are trying to make sure that it informs the reader of exactly what you are proposing, so they are clear on this from the beginning.

Importantly, a thesis is not the subject of the paper but an interpretation or point of view within that subject. It is a specific claim you are making, and will be using the rest of the paper to argue.

For example, you may be writing a paper about the effects of adding omega-3 fatty acid supplements to the diet. That is the subject of the paper.

The thesis would set out what you believe or are suggesting. For example, you may decide to argue the case that you believe that Omega 3 fatty acids supplements are beneficial to health. You could equally argue that they have no effect, or that they are harmful.

In either case, assertiveness here means that your thesis takes a definite position or a stance on a particular topic, and sets out to support that claim.

2. Singular

One Paper = One Concept

With more complex subjects, it's tempting to make the scope of your paper as large as

possible. But resist writing a paper that combines too many loosely related concepts instead of selecting just a single thread to explore thoroughly.

For most papers, you want to discuss one concept and elaborate on that, otherwise the paper quickly loses focus. Too many smaller theses will likely end up confusing the reader or weakening the overall effect.

For example, you may have decided to write a paper about gambling addiction. Trying to write a paper stating that *both* Pavlovian [1] and Skinner's [2] conditioning influence behavior is going to be difficult.

It is better to pick one of the two types and base an essay around that. You could argue that operant conditioning is the major factor underlying the addiction, and set out to prove it. Pavlov would still crop up in the paper, but as part of the background.

3. Specific

Drawing Things Together

Your thesis statement should draw together all the background contained in your introduction and turn it into a single, powerful statement.

Think of your introduction like a space shuttle – only components that are absolutely necessary to performance be included in the design. Ask yourself if each element of your introduction is helping to launch your final thesis statement or whether it's merely extra information.

Your thesis is not a short rerun of the introduction [3], but a specific position that you've arrived at given all the information you lay out in your introduction. After reading this focused thesis statement, it should be clear to the reader exactly where you're intending to steer the rest of the paper.

4. Position

Where Does the Thesis Statement Belong?

A thesis statement should be in the introduction [3] of the paper, taking up a sentence or so.

You have two options for where in the introduction you'd like the thesis statement to be:

1. Some writers prefer to discuss the background and build up to the thesis right at the end of the introduction. In this sense, the thesis statement is like a mini conclusion to the introduction, which serves as a mini-argument in itself.
2. Some writers will begin right off the bat with the thesis statement so that the introduction that follows will make sense.

The choice will depend on your writing style, the topic at hand, your unique thesis and,

naturally, your supervisor's requirements!

The Thesis Statement is Changeable

In a research paper [4], it is a little easier to write the thesis statement, because you already know your hypothesis [5], and will be basing it around that.

For an essay, you will need to establish your aim [6], and the overall direction of the paper. Just because the thesis statement is the foundation of the experiment, it does not mean that you need to do it first.

It is usually best to read some background information and skim through the sources before trying to fashion a statement. This will become your 'working' thesis and, unlike a hypothesis [7], it can change and adapt as you write and modify the paper.

A thesis statement is not set in stone, and can be modified and refined as you develop the essay. As you uncover more information, you may change your view slightly.

In an argumentative essay, for example, where you have to try to rebut arguments, it is not unheard of for the writer to convince themselves that the opposite is true, and completely change the thesis. This is not a problem, and is in fact all part of the scientific process [8].

Once you have written your essay [9], and are ready to proof-read, it is important to check your work and ensure that it actually addresses the thesis. Every single paragraph should be related to this initial statement in some way, or it risks drifting off into irrelevance.

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Links

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