

The Thesis Statement

An Essay in a Nutshell



Every essay serves some kind of purpose beyond simply making a grade for a class. Each paper has some type of central premise, and the paper supports and discusses that premise. The thesis statement is that one sentence (or sometimes two), generally given at the end of the introduction, that gives readers a clear view of the paper's purpose, and the steps taken to support that premise. It's the sentence that tells what your paper is going to be about, but without coming straight out and flatly *announcing* your intention.

Writing a strong thesis statement is a critical part of a good introduction – and really, it's a key part of having a unified paper in general. In many ways, the thesis statement is a bit like an outline in sentence form. It provides much of the structure for your paper in one convenient place. The idea behind the thesis statement is that it should act as a kind of focusing lens for your paper.

The first step to constructing a thesis statement is determining the main purpose of the paper you're writing. This doesn't merely refer to the topic, but rather how you intend to present the information. You have to determine the *reason* you are writing, beyond simply writing to make a grade. There are really three types of writing assignment, in terms of purpose:

- **Informative:** The purpose is simply to explain. You're not really picking any research apart; instead, you're just giving information. A narrative is a good example of this.
- **Analytical:** The purpose is to present your findings on the breakdown of your topic. You are starting from a general idea and looking at all of the component parts that come together to form that idea. This is often the best approach for a research paper or a cause/effect essay.
- **Argumentative:** The purpose is to convince. This might be done with personal experience or reasoned points, or it might back its key details with research. The idea is to persuade the audience to see your point of view.

Obviously, your purpose will sometimes be chosen for you just by the nature of the assignment. An argumentative assignment, for example, will clearly be argumentative in purpose. For other assignments, though, the purpose isn't always so clear. A research paper, for instance, can fit into any of the three purposes described. Sometimes your instructor will specify what type of purpose your paper should have; other times, you'll have to decide for yourself.

Informative

Some papers are written simply to impart information. This type of paper – called an *expository* paper – should have a thesis statement that acts as an accurate preview of the paper's contents. It doesn't draw any conjectures from the information; it merely presents it.

This sort of writing works well for a narrative or process analysis, where the main reason you are writing is simply to give information to the reader. When you create an informative thesis statement, all you are doing is giving facts rather than giving opinions. For instance:

Piloting an airline is usually a routine process in which pilots have a clear set of procedures for the takeoff and ascent, the cruise, and the descent and landing.

The above is an example of an expository thesis statement. It doesn't analyze the information; it simply presents it. It also does what every thesis statement needs to do: it provides a clear preview of exactly what points the paper will make. The example thesis statement makes the main subject clear, but it's also separating the paper into its distinct parts. If this is a thesis for a five-paragraph essay, then the three points in the thesis will correspond to the three body paragraphs – that is, one body paragraph will be about the takeoff and ascent, the next will be about the cruise, and the third will be about the descent and landing. In other words, the paper neatly follows the thesis statement.

Analytical

Unlike a purely informative thesis statement, an analytical thesis statement contains some conjecture or inference. It is not a purely factual statement; rather, it is a key opinion surrounded by (or broken down into) facts. Any essay whose main purpose is to present an analytical topic – a literary analysis or a typical research paper, for instance – should have an analytical thesis statement.

Like the informative thesis statement, an analytical thesis statement should be a preview of the paper's contents that reflects the central premise of the essay, along with the constituent components of that premise. For example:

A look at some of the recent stock market numbers heavily suggests that commercial airlines are faltering, partly due to people being unable to afford air travel, but also due to the reduction in amenities that airlines used to offer.

The above thesis statement is analytical, and the body text that follows it would be broken into three components: a breakdown of the stock market numbers, an explanation of people being unable to afford travel, and evidence to suggest that a lack of amenities also plays a part.

Argumentative

The argumentative thesis statement is somewhat similar to the analytical thesis statement, but it goes several steps further. Where an analytical thesis statement breaks its premise into its components, an argumentative thesis statement provides lines of support for its central premise. It makes a claim and supports that claim with evidence.

Current airport security screenings should be reformed because they do not provide substantial security, they are unduly invasive, and they are prohibitively expensive.

This thesis statement makes a claim – that security screenings at airports are in need of reform – and then gives multiple lines of reasoning in support of that claim. The body text of the paper that follows that thesis statement would expand on each of those points, likely supporting them with details from outside sources and research. A key feature of most argumentative thesis statements is that they typically (though not always) include “should” or “should not” in some form or another. That’s not a requirement, but it makes the thesis statement’s form much more clear.

Other Writing Center Resources

- The Writing Process
- Creating an Outline

Further Reading

- “Tips and Examples for Writing Thesis Statements.” Perdue University Online Writing Lab. <https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/545/01>
- “Writing Tips: Thesis Statements.” The Center for Writing Studies, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. <https://www.cws.illinois.edu/workshop/writers/tips/thesis/>