

Thesis Statements

What this handout is about

This handout describes what a thesis statement is, how thesis statements work in your writing, and how you can craft or refine one for your draft.

What is a thesis statement?

A thesis statement:

- tells the reader how you will interpret the significance of the subject matter under discussion.
- is a road map for the paper; in other words, it tells the reader what to expect from the rest of the paper.
- directly answers the question asked of you. A thesis is an interpretation of a question or subject, not the subject itself. The subject, or topic, of an essay might be World War II or Moby Dick; a thesis must then offer a way to understand the war or the novel.
- makes a claim that others might dispute.
- is usually a single sentence near the beginning of your paper (most often, at the end of the first paragraph) that presents your argument to the reader. The rest of the paper, the body of the essay, gathers and organizes evidence that will persuade the reader of the logic of your interpretation.

How do I create a thesis?

A thesis is the result of a lengthy thinking process. Formulating a thesis is not the first thing you do after reading an essay assignment. Once you do this thinking, you will probably have a “working thesis” that presents a basic or main idea and an argument that you think you can support with evidence. Both the argument and your thesis are likely to need adjustment along the way.

How do I know if my thesis is strong?

If there's time, run it by your instructor or make an appointment at the Writing Center/Corner to get some feedback. Even if you do not have time to get advice elsewhere, you can do some thesis evaluation of your own. **When reviewing your first draft and its working thesis, ask yourself the following:**

- **Do I answer the question?** Re-reading the question prompt after constructing a working thesis can help you fix an argument that misses the focus of the question.
- **Have I taken a position that others might challenge or oppose?** If your thesis simply states facts that no one would, or even could, disagree with, it's possible that you are simply providing a summary, rather than making an argument.
- **Is my thesis statement specific enough?** Thesis statements that are too vague often do not have a strong argument. If your thesis contains words like "good" or "successful," see if you could be more specific: why is something "good"; what specifically makes something "successful"?
- **Does my thesis pass the "So what?" test?** If a reader's first response is likely to be "So what?" then you need to clarify, to forge a relationship, or to connect to a larger issue.
- **Does my essay support my thesis specifically and without wandering?** If your thesis and the body of your essay do not seem to go together, one of them has to change. It's okay to change your working thesis to reflect things you have figured out in the course of writing your paper. Remember, always reassess and revise your writing as necessary.
- **Does my thesis pass the "how and why?" test?** If a reader's first response is "how?" or "why?" your thesis may be too open-ended and lack guidance for the reader. See what you can add to give the reader a better take on your position right from the beginning.