

THESIS STATEMENTS

The term "thesis statement" can be confusing because it can refer both to a strategy a writer uses in the process of composing a paper, and to a type of statement readers expect to find in a certain kind of paper. To avoid misunderstandings, let's discriminate between the two:

As a writing strategy, "thesis statement" refers to a sentence or two in which a writer summarizes or encapsulates the central idea or point she intends to make in a paper. Such a statement need not appear in the final text. The writer formulates such a statement for herself to use as a touchstone to help her decide what she will cover in a paper, and how she wants to organize her ideas. Thus, before she starts on the first draft, a writer writes at the top of the page: "my central point is that music resembles a river." For clarity, let's call the statement a writer formulates for this purpose **a central point**.

More technically, "thesis statement" refers to a statement a writer makes in a paper intended to be an argument. The thesis statement is a conclusion a writer has reached about a subject. He will present it to his readers as a claim or an assertion about the subject. The writer makes this claim in the opening segment of the paper, and in the body of the paper draws the readers' attention to "the grounds (backing, data, facts, evidence, considerations, features) on which the merits of the assertion are to depend. . . . a claim need be conceded [by readers] only if the argument which can be produced in its support proves to be up to standard."¹ In an argument, the writer's purpose is to persuade his readers that his interpretation of the subject meets the standards of meaningful knowledge as defined by the group for which he writes, and thus this interpretation could be accepted by any member of the audience as a logical and reasonable one. For purposes of clarity, let's call the statement a writer formulates for this purpose **a claim**.

Obviously, if the paper you are working on is an argument, the statement you'll be developing during the process of writing the paper—your central point for this paper—will be the claim you'll make in the final version of the paper.

It would probably be wise to read over this handout first, to get a sense of what thesis statements entail—then come back and follow the guidelines for formulating your thesis for a specific paper.

¹ Stephen Toulmin, *The Uses of Argument* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1958), 11-12.

SOME THINGS TO KEEP IN MIND. . .

While only certain kinds of papers you will write fall into the category of arguments and thus require you to make a claim in the introduction, thesis statements in the sense of claims and in the broader sense of central points derive from similar premises:

- Whatever type of paper your instructor asks you to write, he or she assumes that you will be writing about the sense that YOU have made of the subject. In this very important sense your "opinion" lies at the heart of every paper you write. But "point of view" is probably a better term than "opinion," since "opinion" generally connotes some gut-level reaction or unexamined "feeling" or "belief" about a subject. Your instructor assumes that your view is an informed and reasonable one. He or she assumes that you've examined whatever material is available, that you've given it careful, conscious thought, that you can (and will) explain and elaborate on your point of view in the body of your paper. Moreover, your instructor assumes that you'll be following whatever guidelines he/she has laid out in the assignment when you formulate your main point or claim for a paper, and that you'll approach the subject in ways consistent with the methods you've been learning in class. SO. . . the central point or claim is yours, the line of thinking that gives the paper shape and direction is yours, but the point of view you take is guided by ways of seeing and knowing that you are learning about in the course for which you are writing.
- Your instructor also assumes that your paper, regardless of the specific shape it takes, will be unified and coherent. That is, that your paper will focus on one specific point or idea, and that you will explicitly show how all the "pieces" of your idea fit together into an organic whole.
- A thesis statement, whether a central point or a claim, is different from a statement of purpose. A statement of purpose simply outlines a procedure ("In this paper I will first look at X, then I will do Y. . .") or outlines an approach ("I will consider whether or not Vietnam should be called a war"). In contrast, a thesis statement summarizes the results of following such procedures or approaches.

A **statement of purpose** is a statement of what you intend **to do**.

A **thesis statement** embodies what you have **to say** about a topic.

FORMULATING A CENTRAL POINT OR CLAIM

This section gives you some guidelines for formulating a point or claim. Before we get into particulars, here are some specifics about thesis statements you should keep in mind as you are developing a thesis statement:

- Thesis statements can be scary because they require you to get off the fence. No more weaseling and waffling. You have to take a stance. Don't let taking a stance intimidate you. A thesis statement is not a moral stand (unless you choose for it to be one). You are not committing yourself to this position for the rest of your life. When you are developing your thesis statement, think of yourself as saying, "After reviewing the information I have, and having given it some careful thought, here's

one way I see this topic right now. It seems to me to be a reasonable thing to say about the topic, but I could change my mind tomorrow."

- Remember that a claim or central point is, by definition, a generalization or summary. It cannot contain all the particulars you'll bring up in the body of your paper. But as a generalization it must fit your paper the way a tailored suit fits you. It should not generalize beyond the particulars you intend to cover in the body of your paper; at the same time it must be broad enough to include all the main points or ideas you intend to raise.
- In formulating this generalization, you must keep in mind the projected length of your finished paper. Papers that are made up of nothing more than general statements about a subject usually don't win favor with professors. So you'll want to develop a thesis statement that assures you that, in the body of the paper, you will be talking about your subject in some depth and detail. The shorter the paper, the greater the need to "narrow" your focus. As you are formulating your point or claim, think of yourself as looking for an angle, a perspective on the subject that allows you to talk about that aspect of the subject that interests you most and that will produce a paper that has some "meat" to it. It might be wise, then, to work from the bottom up. Make notes to yourself about specific points you want to include in the body of the paper, particulars you want to discuss. Then ask yourself: What do I want to say about these particulars? What do they add up to? What do these particulars mean?

Keeping the above basic guidelines in mind, here are some strategies you can use to formulate a central point or claim.

First of all, aim for one sentence. Attempting to express your claim or central point in one sentence forces you to get right to the heart of the matter, to really nail down your point.

Begin by stating your general topic in a word or phrase that will act as the subject of your sentence. Zero in on that aspect of the topic on which you are focusing:

Latin American **countries**. . .

Debt in Latin American countries. . .

The **burden** of debt in Latin American countries. . .

The **burden** of debt in **Peru**. . .

Once you have your focus, finish the main clause of the sentence by spelling out what you want to say about this specific topic. Choose your words carefully, aiming at precision.

The burden of debt in Peru **is detrimental** to its economy.

The burden of debt in Peru **is fueling inflation and raising the prices of its exports**.

In addition to choosing the wording of the main clause carefully, you can narrow your focus by expressing the parameters of your generalization with qualifying words, phrases and clauses. In the following examples, notice how the ideas in italics restrict the generalization in the main clause.

In Sonnets 10 and 14 Harold Hines points up the tension between desire and duty *through the contrasting images of the openness of gardens and the confines of dark interiors.*

Although there are major differences in the social contracts of Hobbes and Rousseau, both require the consent of the governed.

If China continues to foster capitalistic enterprises and if the United States gives it favored-nation status, it will become a major player in the world economy *within the next twenty years.*

I would group the paintings of John Smith with those of the Impressionists *because of his palette, his brushwork, and his interest in the effects of light.* *According to recent research,* the bacterium *F. stantis* is most toxic *when water temperatures exceed 85° F and there is little or no movement in the body of water in which it lives.*

SOME FINAL SUGGESTIONS

- Formulating your central point or claim is perhaps the most intellectually demanding part of the writing process because, in doing so, you are discovering what you really think. Give yourself sufficient time to spend on this stage of the process.
- It may well take a number of attempts before you have a thesis statement that is "right." Rather than trying to formulate it correctly the first time, try actually writing the statement out. Make an initial stab. Consider what is "right" and "wrong" about the statement you wrote. Move down the page/screen, and try again. Learning from each attempt, go through the process as often as you need to.
- As you go through the process of drafting your thesis statement, read over each statement and ask yourself:
 - do I feel comfortable saying this?
 - is this REALLY what I think?
 - is this really the MAIN point I want to make?

Make changes based on your responses.

- It's easier to write a first draft of your paper if you have formulated a thesis statement before you begin the draft. But it is also very possible that after you have written a first draft you discover a thesis statement that is more accurate than one you began with. No problem. Simply change your thesis statement to match what you find

yourself saying. And allow yourself to change the thesis as often as it is necessary—or to change the body of the paper to accord with the thesis that embodies what you want to say. Nothing is written in stone. Your goal is a paper in which the body exactly matches the central point or claim. Finding such a match is your best bet for handing in a paper that's unified and coherent.

And in case you are wondering if and when you should include this thesis statement in your paper. . .

- Keep in mind the distinction we drew at the beginning of this handout. If you are writing an argument, or if your instructor has said that he/she expects you to have a thesis statement, then you'll want to include it, close to the beginning of your text. It is also very important that your readers easily recognize which statement embodies your claim. You can reach this goal by explicitly marking your claim with a phrase such as:

I will argue that. . .

My view is that. . .

I contend that. . .

Another technique is to place your claim at the end of your introduction in such a way that the stance you are taking is obvious.

- If the paper you are writing does not fall into the category of an argument, you have formulated your central point as a guide for yourself. It is up to you to decide whether or not you want to include the statement itself in your paper. Remember, however, that your reader will expect you to make it very clear what you are doing in a given paper, and what the focus of that paper is going to be.

You may find it helpful to take a look at the Writing Center handout "Introductions and Conclusions."

If you aren't sure

whether a paper you are writing requires a claim

or

whether you should include your central point in the paper itself,

check with your instructor.