Thesis Statements

Introduction

Writing in college often takes the form of persuasion—convincing others that you have an interesting, logical point of view on the subject you are studying. Persuasion is a skill you practice regularly in your daily life. You persuade your roommate to clean up, your parents to let you borrow the car, your friend to vote for your favorite candidate or policy. In college, course assignments often ask you to make a persuasive case in writing. You are asked to convince your reader of your point of view. This form of persuasion, often called academic argument, follows a predictable pattern in writing. After a brief introduction of your topic, you state your point of view on the topic directly and often in one sentence. This sentence is the thesis statement, and it serves as a summary of the argument you’ll make in the rest of your paper.

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 somewhere in your 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.

If your assignment asks you to take a position or develop a claim about a subject, you may need to convey that position or claim in a thesis statement near the beginning of your draft.

Before you develop an argument on any topic, you have to collect and organize evidence, look for possible relationships between known facts (such as surprising contrasts or similarities), and think about the significance of these relationships. Once you do this thinking, you will probably have a "working thesis," a basic or main idea, an argument that you think you can support with evidence but that may need adjustment along the way.

When reviewing your 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, "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 o.k. 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.

Example: Suppose you are taking a course on 19th-century America, and the instructor hands out
the following essay assignment: Compare and contrast the reasons why the North and South fought
the Civil War. You turn on the computer and type out the following:

The North and South fought the Civil War for many reasons, some of which were the same and
some different.

This weak thesis restates the question without providing any additional information. You will
expand on this new information in the body of the essay, but it is important that the reader know
where you are heading. A reader of this weak thesis might think, "What reasons? How are they
the same? How are they different?" Ask yourself these same questions and begin to compare
Northern and Southern attitudes (perhaps you first think, "The South believed slavery was right,
and the North thought slavery was wrong"). Now, push your comparison toward an
interpretation—why did one side think slavery was right and the other side think it was wrong?
You look again at the evidence, and you decide that you are going to argue that the North
believed slavery was immoral while the South believed it upheld the Southern way of life. You
write:

While both sides fought the Civil War over the issue of slavery, the North fought for moral
reasons while the South fought to preserve its own institutions.

Now you have a working thesis! Included in this working thesis is a reason for the war and some
idea of how the two sides disagreed over this reason. As you write the essay, you will probably
begin to characterize these differences more precisely, and your working thesis may start to seem
too vague. Maybe you decide that both sides fought for moral reasons, and that they just focused
on different moral issues. You end up revising the working thesis into a final thesis that really
captures the argument in your paper:

While both Northerners and Southerners believed they fought against tyranny and oppression,
Northerners focused on the oppression of slaves while Southerners defended their own right to
self-government.

Compare this to the original weak thesis. This final thesis presents a way of interpreting evidence
that illuminates the significance of the question. Keep in mind that this is one of many possible
interpretations of the Civil War—it is not the one and only right answer to the question. There
isn't one right answer; there are only strong and weak thesis statements and strong and weak uses
of evidence.