

Thesis Statements

What is a thesis statement and why is it so important?

The thesis statement sets out your paper's purpose and clarifies your topic in one to two sentences (usually located in the first paragraph of your paper). A strong thesis keeps the writer focused and informs the reader of **what** the essay is specifically about, **why** you are writing on this particular topic (i.e., your argument), and **how** your argument will unfold. In addition, an effective thesis statement articulates the **significance** of your subject (the "so-what") and must be unified, precise, and dynamic. Think of your thesis statement as a signpost that both previews your paper's direction and makes an assertion (a specific claim) about the topic at hand. With your thesis statement, you are taking a stand that will be backed up in the rest of your paper. For example:

Dull, vague

Grass is important in the African savanna.

Precise, dynamic

Grass is the essential element in the African savanna's system of nutrient recycling.

Cannot be proven, unmanageable

Attitudes about love vary.

Manageable, supportable

In *Frankenstein*, Mary Shelley discusses Romantic attitudes about the relationship between physical beauty and love.

Four steps to writing an effective thesis statement:

1. Re-state the assignment or topic.
2. Take a position on the issue.
3. Briefly state your reasons why/how.
4. Revise: take out any wordiness or vague ideas, and make sure the thesis relates to the topic.

Example: Your assignment is to discuss the issue of identity in *In Search of April Raintree*.

1. Identity in *In Search of April Raintree* is ...
2. This issue is important ...
3. ... because April's negative perception of her mixed heritage leads to her unhappiness.

After Step 3 you have a **working** thesis:

Identity in *In Search of April Raintree* is important because April's negative perception of her mixed heritage leads to her unhappiness.

This thesis is weak. First, why should we care if April is unhappy? We care because her unhappiness relates to the theme of identity in the book. Second, April isn't always unhappy; she does find a kind of happiness. A Step 4 revision results in a clearer, more specific thesis statement:

4. In *In Search of April Raintree*, April tries unsuccessfully to repress her Native heritage and pass as white, but she is not happy until she acknowledges both aspects of her heritage.

Tips

1. Before writing a thesis statement, be clear on the **type** of paper you are writing. For example, a thesis for an expository (explanatory) essay will vary from theses for compare and contrast, analytical (where an issue is broken down) or argumentative (where evidence supports a specific claim) papers.
2. Also remember that a thesis statement is **not set in stone**. You must first conduct research into your topic (this research helps determine the “what” of your thesis). As you organize your evidence and analyze the facts (their significance and relationships), your thesis statement will evolve.

For example, let’s say you have been assigned to write about shipping fossil fuels by pipeline. As you research the topic, you realize that the controversy around pipelines has led to alternative proposals such as rail transport. You discover that there are very real dangers posed by such alternatives. Your first version of a thesis statement will be vague and generalized. For example:

Proposals to transport fossil fuels by pipeline have raised serious issues for society.

As you work on your paper, you will refine your thesis statement. Be explicit about the type of fossil fuels, what society (i.e., where), and what kind of issues. Avoid vague and abstract language:

As indicated by the recent spate of explosive rail traffic accidents across Canada, transporting oil and gas by rail is a dangerous activity; one that the pipeline industry asserts can be avoided by using well-built, high quality pipelines in conjunction with stringent spill-prevention procedures. Yet according to environmentalists and many First Nations communities, any form of transportation of fossil fuels is risky and should be highly regulated if not curtailed. With pipeline proposals waiting in the wings and the possibility of increased shipping of oil by rail, British Columbia is facing a storm of controversy which must be resolved for environmental, economic, and safety reasons.

3. **Writing the working thesis on an index card and keeping it in front of you during the writing process will help you maintain your focus.**

References/Resources

(Note: many resources on thesis statements exist online. When searching for help, pay attention to the quality of the site you are accessing. Generally, university websites will give the best advice.)

Aaron, Jane E., and Murray McArthur. *The Little, Brown Compact Handbook*. 4th Canadian ed. Toronto: Pearson Education Canada, 2010. Print.

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“Thesis Statement.” *TRU*. Thompson Rivers University, 2013. Web. 2 Dec. 2013.

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