

What is a thesis statement?

A thesis statement . . .

- Makes an **argumentative assertion** about a topic; it states the **conclusions that you have reached** about your topic.
- Makes a promise to the reader about the **scope, purpose, and direction** of your paper.
- Is **focused** and **specific** enough to be "proven" within the boundaries of your paper.
- Is generally located **near the end of the introduction**; sometimes, in a long paper, the thesis will be expressed in several sentences or in an entire paragraph.
- Identifies the **relationships between the pieces of evidence** that you are using to support your argument.

Not all papers require thesis statements! Ask your instructor if you're in doubt whether you need one.

1. Identify a topic

Your topic is the subject about which you will write. Your assignment may suggest several ways of looking at a topic; or it may name a fairly general concept that you will explore or analyze in your paper.

- Consider what your assignment asks you to do
- Inform yourself about your topic
- Focus on one aspect of your topic
- Ask yourself whether your topic is worthy of your efforts

Generate a topic from an assignment

Below are some possible topics based on sample assignments.

Sample assignment 1

Analyze Spain's neutrality in World War II.

Identified topic

Franco's role in the diplomatic relationships between the Allies and the Axis

Reason

This topic avoids generalities such as "Spain" and "World War II," addressing instead on **Franco's role** (a specific aspect of "Spain") and **the diplomatic relations between the Allies and Axis** (a specific aspect of World War II).

Sample assignment 2

Analyze one of Homer's epic similes in the *Iliad*.

Identified topic

The relationship between the portrayal of warfare and the epic simile about Simoisius at 4.547-64.

Reason

This topic focuses on a single simile and relates it to a single aspect of the *Iliad* (**warfare** being a major theme in that work).

Developing a Thesis Statement--Additional information

Consider what your assignment asks you to do

Your assignment may suggest several ways of looking at a topic, or it may name a fairly general concept that you will explore or analyze in your paper. You'll want to read your assignment carefully, looking for key terms that you can use to focus your topic.

- **Sample assignment:** Analyze Spain's neutrality in World War II
- **Key terms:** analyze, Spain's neutrality, World War II

Inform yourself about your topic

After you've identified the key words in your topic, the next step is to read about them in several sources, or generate as much information as possible through an analysis of your topic. Obviously, the more material or knowledge you have, the more possibilities will be available for a strong argument. For the sample assignment above, you'll want to look at books and articles on **World War II** in general, and **Spain's neutrality** in particular.

Focus on one aspect of your topic

As you consider your options, you must decide to focus on one aspect of your topic. This means that you cannot include everything you've learned about your topic, nor should you go off in several directions. If you end up covering too many different aspects of a topic, your paper will sprawl and be unconvincing in its argument, and it most likely will **not fulfill the assignment requirements**.

For the sample assignment above, both **Spain's neutrality** and **World War II** are topics far too broad to explore in a paper. You may instead decide to focus on **Franco's role in the diplomatic relationships between the Allies and the Axis**, which narrows down what aspects of Spain's neutrality and World War II you want to discuss, as well as establishes a specific link between those two aspects.

Ask yourself whether your topic is worthy of your efforts

Before you go too far, however, ask yourself whether your topic is worthy of your efforts. Try to avoid topics that already have too much written about them (i.e., "eating disorders and body image among adolescent women") or that simply are not important (i.e. "why I like ice cream"). **These topics may lead to a thesis that is either dry fact or a weird claim that cannot be supported. A good thesis falls somewhere between the two extremes. To arrive at this point, ask yourself what is new, interesting, contestable, or controversial about your topic.**

As you work on your thesis, remember to **keep the rest of your paper in mind at all times**. Sometimes your thesis needs to evolve as you develop new insights, find new evidence, or take a different approach to your topic.

2. Derive a main point from topic

Once you have a topic, you will have to decide what the main point of your paper will be. This point, the "controlling idea," becomes the core of your argument (thesis statement) and it is the unifying idea to which you will relate all your sub-theses. You can then turn this "controlling idea" into a purpose statement about what you intend to do in your paper.

- Look for patterns in your evidence
- Compose a purpose statement

Consult the examples below for suggestions on how to look for patterns in your evidence and construct a purpose statement.

Example 1

Topic

Franco's role in the diplomatic relationships between the Allies and the Axis

Evidence

- Franco first tried to negotiate with the Axis
- Franco turned to the Allies when he couldn't get some concessions that he wanted from the Axis

Possible conclusion:

Spain's neutrality in WWII occurred for an entirely personal reason: Franco's desire to preserve his own (and Spain's) power.

Purpose statement

This paper will analyze Franco's diplomacy during World War II to see how it contributed to Spain's neutrality.

Example 2

Topic

The relationship between the portrayal of warfare and the epic simile about Simoisius at 4.547-64.

Evidence

- The simile compares Simoisius to a tree, which is a peaceful, natural image.
- The tree in the simile is chopped down to make wheels for a chariot, which is an object used in warfare.

Possible conclusion:

At first, the simile seems to take the reader away from the world of warfare, but we end up back in that world by the end.

Purpose statement

This paper will analyze the way the simile about Simoisius at 4.547-64 moves in and out of the world of warfare.

Derive purpose statement from topic

Look for patterns in your evidence

To find out what your "controlling idea" is, you have to examine and evaluate your evidence. As you consider your evidence, you may notice patterns emerging, data repeated in more than one source, or facts that favor one view more than another. These patterns or data may then lead you to some conclusions about your topic and suggest that you can successfully argue for one idea better than another.

For instance, you might find out that Franco first tried to negotiate with the Axis, but when he couldn't get some concessions that he wanted from them, he turned to the Allies. As you read more about Franco's decisions, you may conclude that Spain's neutrality in WWII occurred for an entirely personal reason: his desire to preserve his own (and Spain's) power. Based on this conclusion, you can then write a trial thesis statement to help you decide what material belongs in your paper.

Compose a purpose statement

Sometimes you won't be able to find a focus or identify your "spin" or specific argument immediately. Like some writers, you might begin with a purpose statement just to get yourself going. **A purpose statement is one or more sentences that announce your topic and indicate the structure of the paper but do not state the conclusions you have drawn.** Thus, you might begin with something like this:

- This paper will look at modern language to see if it reflects male dominance or female oppression.
- I plan to analyze anger and derision in offensive language to see if they represent a challenge of society's authority.

At some point, you can turn a purpose statement into a thesis statement. As you think and write about your topic, you can restrict, clarify, and refine your argument, crafting your thesis statement to reflect your thinking.

As you work on your thesis, remember to **keep the rest of your paper in mind at all times**. Sometimes your thesis needs to evolve as you develop new insights, find new evidence, or take a different approach to your topic.

3. Compose a draft thesis statement

If you are writing a paper that will have an argumentative thesis and are having trouble getting started, the techniques in the table below may help you develop a temporary or "working" thesis statement.

Purpose statement

Begin with a purpose statement that you will later turn into a thesis statement.

Assignment: Discuss the history of the Reform Party and explain its influence on the 1990 presidential and Congressional election.

Purpose Statement: This paper briefly sketches the history of the grassroots, conservative, Perot-led Reform Party and analyzes how it influenced the economic and social ideologies of the two mainstream parties.

Question-to-Assertion

If your assignment asks a specific question(s), turn the question(s) into an assertion and give reasons why it is true or reasons for your opinion.

Assignment: What do Aylmer and Rappaccini have to be proud of? Why aren't they satisfied with these things? How does pride, as demonstrated in "The Birthmark" and "Rappaccini's Daughter," lead to unexpected problems?

Beginning thesis statement: Alymer and Rappaccini are proud of their great knowledge; however, they are also very greedy and are driven to use their knowledge to alter some aspect of nature as a test of their ability. Evil results when they try to "play God."

Main idea

Write a sentence that summarizes the main idea of the essay you plan to write.

Main idea: The reason some toys succeed in the market is that they appeal to the consumers' sense of the ridiculous and their basic desire to laugh at themselves.

List ideas

Make a list of the ideas that you want to include; consider the ideas and try to group them.

1. nature = peaceful
2. war matériel = violent (competes with 1?)
3. need for time and space to mourn the dead
4. war is inescapable (competes with 3?)

Formula

Use a formula to arrive at a working thesis statement (you will revise this later).

- although most readers of _____ have argued that _____, closer examination shows that _____.
- _____ uses _____ and _____ to prove that _____.
- phenomenon x is a result of the combination of _____, _____, and _____.

Compose a draft thesis statement

What to keep in mind as you draft an initial thesis statement

Beginning statements obtained through the methods illustrated above can serve as a framework for planning or drafting your paper, but remember they're not yet the specific, argumentative thesis you want for the final version of your paper. In fact, in its first stages, a thesis statement usually is ill-formed or rough and serves only as a planning tool.

As you write, you may discover evidence that does not fit your temporary or "working" thesis. Or you may reach deeper insights about your topic as you do more research, and you will find that your thesis statement has to be more complicated to match the evidence that you want to use.

You must be willing to reject or omit some evidence in order to keep your paper cohesive and your reader focused. Or you may have to revise your thesis to match the evidence and insights that you want to discuss. **Read your draft carefully, noting the conclusions you have drawn and the major ideas which support or prove those conclusions. These will be the elements of your final thesis statement.**

Sometimes you will not be able to identify these elements in your early drafts, but as you consider how your argument is developing and how your evidence supports your main idea, ask yourself, "**What is the main point that I want to prove/discuss?**" and "**How will I convince the reader that this is true?**" When you can answer these questions, then you can begin to refine the thesis statement.

As you work on your thesis, remember to **keep the rest of your paper in mind at all times**. Sometimes your thesis needs to evolve as you develop new insights, find new evidence, or take a different approach to your topic.

4. Refine and polish the thesis statement

To get to your final thesis, you'll need to refine your draft thesis so that it's **specific** and **arguable**.

- Ask if your draft thesis addresses the assignment
- Question each part of your draft thesis
- Clarify vague phrases and assertions
- Investigate alternatives to your draft thesis

Consult the example below for suggestions on how to refine your draft thesis statement.

Sample Assignment

Choose an activity and define it as a symbol of American culture. Your essay should cause the reader to think critically about the society which produces and enjoys that activity.

1. Ask

The phenomenon of drive-in facilities is an interesting symbol of American culture, and these facilities demonstrate significant characteristics of our society.

This statement does not fulfill the assignment because it does not require the reader to think critically about society.

2. Question

Drive-ins are an interesting symbol of American culture because they represent Americans' significant creativity and business ingenuity.

This statement is more precise in that it identifies two American characteristics that drive-ins appear to symbolize: creativity and ingenuity. But this assertion also seems to be one that few would argue with.

3. Clarify

Among the types of drive-in facilities familiar during the twentieth century, drive-in movie theaters best represent American creativity, not merely because they were the forerunner of later drive-ins and drive-throughs, but because of their impact on our culture: they changed our relationship to the automobile, changed the way people experienced movies, and changed movie-going into a family activity.

This statement introduces a new idea, and it is the first statement that is arguable to some extent. The new information is that drive-in movies were forerunners of later developments and that they had an impact on our culture.

4. Investigate

While drive-in facilities such as those at fast-food establishments, banks, pharmacies, and dry cleaners symbolize America's economic ingenuity, they also have affected our personal standards.

Notice that this sentence is different in structure from the one you started with ("Drive-ins represent Americans' creativity and business ingenuity"). The "factual" information in the earlier statement has been incorporated into a dependent clause ("While drive-ins . . . ingenuity"). The contestable part of your idea then appears in the independent clause ("they also have affected our personal standards"). In other words, you are no longer focusing on a claim that most people would agree with; instead you are using the obvious as a point of departure for an idea you will need to "prove."

5. Refine

While drive-in facilities such as those at fast-food restaurants, banks, pharmacies, and dry cleaners symbolize (1) Americans' business ingenuity, they also have contributed (2) to an increasing homogenization of our culture, (3) a willingness to depersonalize relationships with others, and (4) a tendency to sacrifice quality for convenience.

This statement is now specific and fulfills all parts of the assignment. This version, like any good thesis, is not self-evident; its points, 1-4, will have to be proven with evidence in the body of the paper. The numbers in this statement indicate the order in which the points will be presented. Depending on the length of the paper, there could be one paragraph for each numbered item or there could be blocks of paragraph for even pages for each one.

As you work on your thesis, remember to **keep the rest of your paper in mind at all times**. Sometimes your thesis needs to evolve as you develop new insights, find new evidence, or take a different approach to your topic.

5. Complete the final thesis statement

The Bottom Line

As you move through the process of crafting a thesis, you'll need to remember four things:

1. **Context matters!** Think about your course materials and lectures. Try to relate your thesis to the ideas your instructor is discussing.
2. As you go through the process described in this section, **always keep your assignment in mind**. You will be more successful when your thesis (and paper) responds to the assignment than if it argues a semi-related idea.
3. Your thesis statement should be **precise, focused, and contestable**; it should predict the sub-theses or blocks of information that you will use to prove your argument.
4. Make **sure** that you keep the rest of your paper in mind at all times. Change your thesis as your paper evolves, because you do **not** want your thesis to promise more than your paper actually delivers.

In the beginning, the thesis statement was a tool to help you sharpen your focus, limit material and establish the paper's purpose. When your paper is finished, however, the thesis statement becomes a tool for your reader. It tells the reader what you have learned about your topic and what evidence led you to your conclusion. It keeps the reader on track--well able to understand and appreciate your argument.