

Thesis Statements

Clearly stating your argument

AIMS:

- To clarify what a thesis statement is.
- To teach students how to write a good thesis statement.

Lecture: Due to the length of first year papers, the students need to be able to state clearly and succinctly exactly what the argument of their paper is going to be.

Every good academic paper begins by presenting a thesis statement. The purpose of every academic paper is to make an argument. The thesis statement is the very core of the introduction. The thesis responds to the question that you have been given and tells the reader what you will be arguing in response to that question. Do not simply re-word the essay question.

Outline the four components of the lecture – What is a thesis statement?, Writing a thesis statement, Methods of Supporting your Argument and Assessing your thesis statement – along with the overall aims of the lecture (as stated above).

What is a thesis statement?

A thesis statement is a short statement, usually only a single sentence that **distils the central argument of an academic paper**. It is first stated in the **introduction** of the paper. The **body** of the essay then goes about illustrating the merits of this statement, or why it is that the author has taken that particular stance. The **Conclusion** of the paper should refer back to the thesis statement and highlight briefly the strengths and weaknesses of the central argument as outlined in the body of the paper (summary of the key points that built the argument).

The thesis statement is not just stating a fact nor an opinion, it must make a claim or argument and a premise: information on how you will persuade them that your argument is correct/valid.

Most markers begin grading a paper by first reading the introduction and conclusion - the two places where the thesis statement needs to be absolutely clear. Often in essays there is no wrong or right answer, therefore, your thesis statement tells the marker what your main argument is, and the marker

will then assess your work on how well you have proven or supported your argument / made clear the logic of your thesis statement.

Thus a thesis statement:

- Presents your argument to the reader
- Answers the essay question
- Is an interpretation of a question or subject
- States how you will interpret the significance of the subject under discussion
- Is a road map for the paper: it tells the reader what to expect from the rest of the paper.
- Must take a stance; do not simply restate the question.

Example & Class Exercise

Question: Compare and contrast reading for pleasure and academic reading. Which in your opinion is better?

Thesis statement: This paper argues that although leisurely reading can be a worthwhile experience, academic reading is required to succeed in a tertiary institution. However, it also argues that both types of reading are beneficial for people of all ages and should be pursued throughout life. The paper does this by exploring the two types of reading and their purposes, arguing that the habit and skills acquired through reading for fun are beneficial to the practise of academic reading. Therefore, both are good and neither one is above the other though they serve different purposes.

Exercise

Ask students IF this is a good thesis statement, and if so why? The answers should be linked to the list on what a thesis statement is. E.g. it is clear what the writers stance is, has not simply restated the question....etc.

This statement gives a clear indication of exactly what it is that the student intends to argue. It is important to emphasise that a thesis statement must be clear, unambiguous and precise, but this does not mean an absolute statement on an issue is needed. Students don't have to always choose one side, they can argue for both sides, provided they have valid support for doing so.

Writing a thesis statement

Think of a thesis statement as the main answer to the essay question. Before a student comes to a decision on what their main argument will be, they must have done the reading (with notes); you must collect and organise evidence, look for and understand the relationship between facts and the significance of these relationships. You will then have a 'working thesis': an argument that you think you can support with evidence but may need adjustment as you research further or while writing your paper. Writing a thesis statement BEFORE doing the reading, they may end up writing the paper around an ill-considered or emotionally charged stance. A thesis statement can also be rewritten once the paper is complete if the student has found through the course of the writing process, and after further possible research, that their opinion has altered.

Common problem: repeating the question

The most common trend amongst undergraduate students, is to simply repeat the question that was posed. **For example**, many student's thesis statement to the essay question would be:

This paper will compare and contrast reading for pleasure and academic reading, and will state which is better.

It needs to be made clear to the students that this is not what a thesis statement should be. **It MUST express a position.**

Methods of Supporting your Argument

Remember that without the support/evidence, the thesis statement is incomplete, it is more of a view point than it is an argument.

1) Critical engagement with the authors

This is the starting point of any justification. Some papers may make use of a single author, highlighting their strengths and weaknesses; others may show how ideas have evolved as different authors have picked them up. In some cases, two authors will be pitted against one another, as in a debate. The student can usually justify their position by highlighting the strengths and weaknesses of the author(s) and thereby working toward a logical conclusion.

2) Using evidence from other sources to justify your statement

Most essays for first years will have a couple of readings in the reader that relate specifically to the question. A lot of students will simply use these to make their argument. Using data from an external source, or a position from an external source that either verifies the core readings, criticises any of the core readings or offers a new position is an excellent way to justify a thesis statement. It shows a

willingness to do extra research and form or compose an original paper. External sources are also a key marker of a critical paper.

3) Using examples to justify a thesis statement

Using original examples is an invaluable way of justifying a position, if the example is applied accurately. For example, on a debate on the sources of legitimacy a student may compare and contrast the positions of two authors, one claiming that violence is a source of legitimacy, the other that democratic procedures are. China can then be cited as an example of a third source of legitimacy (material gains) and be used to show that while both the authors have valid arguments, they are not the only perspectives.

Assessing your Thesis Statement¹

If you have started working on your essay well in advance, it is a good idea to ask your tutor to read your thesis statement and give you some feedback. If you do not get a chance to do so, ask yourself the following questions:

Have I answered the question?

Re-read the question after you have written your working thesis. This will help you ensure that your thesis statement (and therefore your entire essay) is relevant to and answers the question.

Have I taken a position that others would challenge or oppose?

If your thesis statement 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," be more specific. State why that particular thing is "good"; what specifically makes something "successful"?

Does my essay support my thesis specifically and without wandering?

Lesson Plan 4

If your thesis and the body of your essay do not seem to go together, one of them has to change. Always reassess and revise your writing as necessary, change your thesis statement if your paper supports a different stance from the one you state in your thesis.

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, lacks guidance for the reader or does not state the main premise (evidence) that supports this argument.



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