

Thesis Statements

WHAT IS A THESIS?

Probably the most common requirement for papers in the humanities and social sciences is that they have a *thesis*. The thesis is often defined as a paper's "main claim" or "argument," but what one looks like varies from discipline to discipline (and even paper to paper). However, there are some common guidelines to writing a solid thesis statement.

A thesis should **not** be:

- The topic of your paper
- A commonly-accepted fact
- Your unsupported opinion on the subject matter

A thesis **should** be:

- **Contestable:** the claim or assertion in your thesis should be something a reasonable person could disagree with.
- **Appropriate:** The thesis should respond your instructor's assignment prompt. If the prompt asks an open-ended question, your thesis should answer it. If the prompt asks you to pick a topic, your thesis should not only identify your topic, but make a specific and focused argument about it (see "Contestable," above).
- **Focused:** Your thesis should account for the scope of your paper. Your thesis should be specific enough to be thoroughly proven in the length of your paper.

The following are examples of poor thesis statements:

1. "This paper discusses the cost of higher education."
2. "The industrial revolution caused many changes in British society."
3. "*Slaughterhouse-Five* is a very funny book."

#1 and #2 are not contestable. #3 is contestable, but is not focused enough to guide a paper (it's also not an appropriate answer to a college-level prompt). If we were to revise these thesis statements, they might look something like:

1. "The financial benefits of a post-secondary degree are no longer worth the high cost of college." (A reasonable person could argue that financial (or other) benefits are worth the cost of college).
2. "The vast urban slums that sprung up during the British industrial revolution caused a moral panic among the upper classes, who developed a system of social institutions – schools, prisons, and hospitals – to control the 'vices' of this new working class population." (A reasonable person could argue that these institutions were developed for other reasons/purposes).
3. "*Slaughterhouse-Five* most effectively uses black humor when it satirizes America's attitude towards foreign wars." (The revised thesis specifies and expands on the place and purpose of the novel's humor).

WHERE DOES A THESIS GO?

Common practice dictates that your thesis is the last sentence in your introduction, but this is not a hard-and-fast rule. Sometimes, it makes sense to give the reader several paragraphs of background information before introducing your thesis. Longer, complex theses often take up a whole (short) paragraph. In some types of writing, the thesis does not come until the very end of the piece. No matter where your thesis falls, though, your introduction should make the direction of your paper clear.

HOW DO I COME UP WITH A THESIS?

It may seem counterintuitive – after all, isn't the thesis the base on which you build your whole paper? – but the development of an effective thesis often takes place over multiple drafts of the entire paper.

Drafting an initial thesis

While your thesis will change as you write, you should start off with a rough idea of what you want your paper to say. One way to do this is to ask yourself a question that your thesis will answer. The question should be broad enough to have many possible answers (so that your thesis is contestable), but narrow enough to be answered over the course of your paper. For example:

- What is the biggest problem facing higher education? (for an essay about issues in higher education).
- Why were so many schools, hospitals, and asylums built during the late 19th century? (for an essay about social change during the Victorian era).
- Why is *Slaughterhouse-Five* – a book about war – so funny? (for an essay about *Slaughterhouse-Five*).

If you're having difficulty framing your answer as a thesis, try slotting your ideas into a standardized format:

- “X and Y at first seem similar (or different), but they are actually different (or similar) because Z”

A college degree seems synonymous with financial security, but putting students into debt actually leaves them poorer than if they had never pursued higher education in the first place.

- “At first glance X might look like Y, but when you look more closely, it actually looks like Z.”

At first glance, the explosion of hospitals, schools, and asylums during the Victorian era looks like charity, but when you look more closely, it looks more like an insidious obsession with control over the working poor.

- “They say X, but I say Y.”

Some critics find the humor in Slaughterhouse-Five inappropriate for the novel's serious subject matter, but I think that the book's black humor is most effective when satirizing serious subjects like war.

Your thesis won't stay in this format, but a working draft will help you begin to organize your ideas.

Revising and Refining a Thesis

Writing is often a way for us to process and develop our thoughts. The argument you end up making in your paper may not be the same as your original thesis, and that's okay. Here are some strategies for locating a new-and-improved thesis after you've written a first draft:

- Consider your focus. Did you start out planning to write about X, Y, and Z, but then spent three pages on X, one on Y, and none on Z? The writing process often focuses our ideas more narrowly than we expect. Instead of re-writing each section, consider revising your thesis to focus on X.
- Make a reverse outline. Outlining a paper that you've already written can help you clearly visualize the focus and direction of your ideas. If you don't know how to make a reverse outline, look up directions online or schedule a writing center consultation.
- Consider the relationships between your paragraphs. Spend some time thinking through how the ideas in them relate to one another; then make sure these relationships are reflected in your thesis statement.

Checking Back

If you spend too much time with your thesis statement itself, you might forget about the rest of your paper! The easiest way to ensure that your final draft is on track is to check your topic sentences. Does each topic sentence clearly show how the information in that paragraph relates to the thesis? If not, read the paragraph carefully to determine what, if anything, needs to be changed or re-organized.