



NO. 26 IN THE WRITING CENTER HANDOUT SERIES

How to Write a Thesis Statement

The thesis statement is the foundation of your entire essay, but don't let its importance intimidate you! Following are some tips for developing and perfecting an effective thesis statement.

Develop a Working Thesis.

A working thesis is a rough draft of your thesis statement. It can help you in the prewriting stage to organize your thoughts in an outline. Once you begin writing, the working thesis can make your first draft more focused, allowing you to concentrate on style in later revisions. Remember that this sentence is a “working” thesis: be flexible, allowing new ideas to emerge while writing and revising.

- The first step toward writing a working thesis is to formulate a strong argument. If your overall argument is weak or unfocused, your thesis statement will be similarly disordered. Thinking clearly and specifically about what your paper will say can lead you to a sentence or two that articulates your ideas.
- Respond to an assigned question with a complete sentence. Chances are, your response will contain the most important ideas of your paper, which you can use to build a thesis.
- Try writing a sentence that begins with “I intend to show” or “I will prove.” This is not a final thesis, but it is a way to get your main ideas into one sentence. Once you can state your ideas, take out the “I intend...” phrase and work on making the words represent exactly what you want to say.
- Answer the question, “What is your paper about?” in one sentence. Knowing the answer to this question shows you have a good idea of what you prove — and what your thesis should be.

Revise Your Thesis.

While a working thesis can launch you into a successful first draft, you will need to revise it in later drafts. Since the thesis is the most fundamental sentence or group of sentences in your essay, how you write it is particularly important. This does not mean you should aim for poetry; instead, work on writing a clear statement of your ideas.

- Persuade the reader to agree with your point of view. In many college essays, this persuasion lies in convincing someone to interpret a book, article, or event a particular way. Does your thesis strongly suggest a compelling argument? Try showing that your essay topic is controversial or ambiguous; then take a stand.
- Ask yourself how and why. Instead of stating a general claim or opinion, look at the reasons behind an event and the significance of your argument.
- Don't try to say too much. Cramming too many details in a thesis will obscure your main argument.
- Make vague words and phrases specific. For example, don't say that a character is important; spell out that importance. Say that she provides the foundation for the narrative even though she is a minor character.
- Let someone else read your introductory paragraph, and ask her to point out your thesis. She should be able to recognize your main argument and have an idea of where your paper leads.

(continued on reverse)



NO. 26 IN THE WRITING CENTER HANDOUT SERIES

How to Write a Thesis Statement, Continued

Below are the steps a writer might use to arrive at a thesis statement. While this method isn't the only way to write a thesis, it does exemplify some of the techniques described on the other side of this handout. To read the completed paper by Erin Brandt, see the Hutchen's Prize notebook in the Writing Center.

1. Decide on a topic: Pip's relationship to other characters
Brainstorm: Which characters are most important? Which interest me? Which seem to go together?
2. Narrow topic: Focus on Trabb's boy, Herbert Pocket, and Orlick.
Brainstorm: How does each character relate to Pip? What are the similarities among these three relationships? What is Dickens doing with these pairings?

Working thesis #1: *Dickens uses Trabb's boy, Herbert Pocket, and Orlick as Pip's doubles.*

3. Explore this statement: Define how Dickens uses the characters
Brainstorm: How specifically are the three characters Pip's doubles? What exactly does "double" mean — am I sure about this definition?

Working thesis #2: *Trabb's boy tells Pip what is right; Herbert Pocket is kind of a better Pip; and Orlick is a lot more violent than Pip would ever be.*

4. Look for significance: A good thesis answers why or how.
Brainstorm: Why did Dickens make these characters doubles? How does my understanding of the main themes or characters change because of the doubles?

Working thesis #3: *Dickens uses the doubles of Trabb's boy, Herbert Pocket, and Orlick to show the reader more about Pip.*

5. Be specific: Define what we learn about Pip. Suggest what each character shows without making a list of my main points.
Brainstorm: Would a reader be able to see what I'm proving from the thesis? Is my thesis persuasive enough? Does it take a side?

Final thesis: *In Great Expectations, Dickens uses doubles to provide additional insight into the psyche of the protagonist Pip: through Trabb's boy, his conscience; through Herbert Pocket, his better nature; and through Orlick, his repressed violence.*

For more information on developing thesis statements, see:

College Writing Skills by John Langan

<http://www.indiana.edu/~wts/wts/thesis.html>

<http://english.ttu.edu/uwc/thesis.html>

The St. Martin's Handbook (5th ed): 63-64, 267-69, 312, 404-5

Writing Center Handout No. 25. "What is a Thesis Statement?"