

## #1) Thesis Statements and Essay Maps

(adapted from Jean Wyrick's Steps to Writing Well, 2nd ed., published by Harcourt Brace College Publishers)

Every essay needs a thesis statement, whether it is stated directly or implied. Most teachers want to see your thesis statement in the first paragraph of your essays. The thesis statement declares the main point or controlling idea of your entire essay. It frequently answers the questions "What is the subject of this essay"; "What is the writer's opinion on this subject"; "What is the writer's purpose in this essay?" (for example, to explain something? to argue a position? to move people into action? to entertain?). When you are drafting your essay, use a "working thesis" to help you move from prewriting to drafting to revision. Everything in your essay should support your thesis. This does not mean that you are wedded to your thesis; as you write, you may discover that what you really want to write about is different from what you started with. Changing directions is not uncommon; remember:

*Writing is an act of discovery.*

So thesis statements should not be carved in stone. Here are some guidelines for writing a good thesis:

### **-A good thesis states the writer's clearly defined opinion on some subject.**

Tell the reader **what you think about the topic**. Don't dodge the issue. State your opinion specifically and precisely.

**Poor:** Many people have different opinions on whether people under twenty-one should be able to drink alcohol, and I agree with some of them.

**Poor:** The question of whether we need a national law governing the minimum age to drink alcohol is a controversial issue in many states.

### **-A good thesis has something worthwhile to say.**

**Poor:** The four children in my family have completely different personalities. [This may be true, but would anyone but your mom and dad really be fascinated with this topic?]

### **-A good thesis is limited to fit the assignment.**

Don't allow your thesis to promise more of a discussion than you can adequately deliver in a short essay.

**Poor:** Black artists have contributed a lot to American culture. ["Black artists," "culture," and "a lot" cover more ground than can be dealt with in one short essay]

**Better:** Scott Joplin was a major influence in the development of the uniquely American music called ragtime. [specifically defined and narrow]

### **-A good thesis is clearly located in the first or second paragraph and is supported by an essay map.**

Many thesis sentences will benefit from the addition of an **essay map**, a brief statement in the introductory paragraph introducing the major points to be discussed in the essay. Let's suppose you have been assigned the task of praising or criticizing some aspect of your campus. You decide that your thesis will be "The campus bookstore is the worst place in town to buy textbooks." Although your thesis does take a stand ("worst place"), your reader will not know why the bookstore is so poor or what points you will cover in your argument. With an essay map added, the reader will have a brief but specific idea where the essay is going and how it will be developed. Consider the following thesis statements and essay maps (essay maps underlined).

**Thesis:** The campus bookstore is the worst place in town to buy textbooks. The unreasonable prices, the lack of qualified employees, and the constant book shortages discourage all but the most loyal customers.

Sometimes, you can include the essay map in the thesis:

Unreasonable prices, unqualified employees, and constant shortages make the campus bookstore a terrible place to buy books.  
Because of its free services, well-trained tutors, and useful learning aids, the Writing Center is an excellent place for students seeking academic help.  
For those students who need extra help with their writing skills, the Writing Center is one of the best resources because of its numerous free services, well-trained tutors, and variety of useful learning aids

### What a Thesis Isn't

**A thesis is not a title. A title can often give the reader some notion of what the thesis is going to be, but it is not the thesis itself. The thesis itself, as presented in the thesis statement, does not suggest the main idea--it is the main idea. Remember, too, that a thesis statement will always be a complete sentence; there is no other way to make a statement.**

**Title: Not a Thesis**

*Homes and Schools*

*Mick Jagger on the Move*

*Inflation and Old Age*

*A Shattering Experience*

**Thesis Statement**

Parents ought to participate more in the education of their children.

Mick Jagger's ability to change his public image as public tastes change distinguishes him as the one Rolling Stone who has gathered no moss.

Continuing inflation makes it almost impossible to plan intelligently for one's retirement.

My fall from the fifth floor of my glass house was certainly a shattering experience.

**A thesis is not an announcement of the subject. A thesis takes a stand. It expresses an attitude toward the subject. It is not simply the subject itself.**

**Announcement: Not a Thesis**

My subject is the incompetence of Professor X.

I want to share some thoughts with you about our space program.

The thesis of this paper is the difficulty of solving our environmental problems.

**Thesis Statement**

Professor X is a dynamic, forceful teacher.

Space exploration is a waste of tax money.

Environmental problems are more difficult than most people believe.

**A thesis is not a statement of absolute fact. A thesis makes a judgment or interpretation. There's no way to spend a whole paper supporting a statement that needs no support.**

**Fact: Not a Thesis**

Jane Austen is the author of several 19th century novels.

The capital of Arkansas is Little Rock.

Suicide is the deliberate act of taking one's own life.

There are four Ninja Turtles on the Saturday morning cartoon.

Many people have cats as household pets.

### Avoiding Common Errors in Thesis Statements

Here are five mistakes to avoid when forming your thesis statements:

- 1. Don't make your thesis merely an announcement of your subject matter or a description of your intentions. State an attitude toward the subject.**

**Poor:** The subject of this paper is my experience with a pet boa constrictor. (This is an announcement of subject, not thesis)

**Poor:** I'm going to discuss boa constrictors as pets. (This is a statement of intention, not a thesis.)

**Better:** Boa constrictors do not make healthy indoor pets. (The writer states an opinion that will be explained and illustrated in the essay.)

**Better:** My pet boa constrictor, Sir Pent, was a much better bodyguard than my dog, Fang. (The writer states an opinion that will be explained and illustrated in the essay.)
- 2. Don't clutter your thesis with expressions such as "in my opinion," "I believe," and "in this essay I'll argue that. . ." These unnecessary phrases weaken your thesis statement because they often make you sound timid or uncertain. This is your essay; therefore, the opinions expressed are obviously yours. Be forceful; speak directly, with conviction.**

**Poor:** My opinion is that the federal government should devote more money to solar energy research.

**Poor:** My thesis states that the federal government should devote more money to solar energy research.

**Better:** The federal government should devote more money to solar energy research.

**Poor:** In this essay I will give you lots of reasons why horse racing should not be legalized in Texas.

**Better:** Horse racing should not be legalized in Texas.
- 3. Don't be unreasonable. Making irrational or oversimplified claims will not persuade your reader that you have a thorough understanding of the issue. Don't insult any reader; avoid irresponsible charges, name calling, and profanity.**

**Poor:** Radical religious fanatics across the nation are trying to impose their right-wing views by censoring high school library books. [Words such as "radical," "fanatics," "right-wing," and "censoring" will antagonize many readers immediately.]

**Better:** Only local school board members, not religious leaders or parents, should decide which books high school libraries should order.

**Poor:** Too many corrupt books in our high school libraries, selected by liberal or atheistic educators, are undermining the morals of our youth. [Again, some readers will be offended.]

**Better:** In order to ensure that high school libraries contain books that reflect community standards, parents should have a voice in selecting new titles.
- 4. Don't merely state a fact. A thesis is an assertion of opinion that leads to discussion. Don't select an idea that is self-evident or dead-ended.**

**Poor:** Child abuse is a terrible problem in our country. [yes, of course; who wouldn't agree that child abuse is terrible?]

**Better:** Child abuse laws in this state are too lenient for repeat offenders. [This thesis will lead to a discussion in which supporting arguments and evidence will be presented.]

**Poor:** Advertisers often use sex in their ads to sell products. [True. But how could this essay be turned into something more than a description of one ad after another?]

**Better:** A number of liquor advertisers, well known for using pictures of sexy models to sell their products, are now using special graphics to send subliminal sexual messages to their readers. [This claim is controversial and will require persuasive supporting evidence.]

**Better:** Although long criticized for their sexist portrayal of women in television commercials, the auto industry is just as often guilty of stereotyping men as brainless idiots unable to make a decision. [This thesis makes a point that may lead to an interesting discussion.]
- 5. Don't express your thesis in the form of a question, unless the answer is already obvious to the reader.**

**Poor:** Why should every college student have to take two years of foreign language?

**Better:** Math majors should be exempt from the foreign language requirement.