

# Thesis Statements: Guide for Writing Associates

## Part 1: Presentation

- ★ A thesis statement...
  - shows how you interpret the significance of your topic.
  - is a road map for the paper; in other words, it tells the reader what to expect from the rest of the paper.
  - directly answers the question asked of you, or that you ask yourself. A thesis is an *interpretation* of a question or subject, not a statement explaining the subject itself.
  - is arguable; a thesis should make a claim that others might dispute.
  - usually appears at the end of your first paragraph and presents your argument to the reader. The rest of the paper provides evidence that will persuade the reader of the logic of your thesis.
- ★ Questions to ask yourself:
  - **Do I answer the question?** Return to the prompt after constructing a working thesis to ensure that your argument specifically addresses the focus of the question.
  - **Have I taken a position that others might challenge or oppose?** After writing your thesis, try coming up with a statement that challenges your interpretation. If you can't, your thesis is not debatable enough, and may be a summary rather than an interpretation.
  - **Is my thesis statement specific enough?** Thesis statements that are too vague often do not have strong arguments. For example, if your thesis states that something is "successful," you must explain what *specifically* makes it "successful." Your thesis should always address the "why?" and/or the "how?", not just the "what?"
  - **Does my thesis pass the "So what?" test?** In addition to presenting an interpretation of a topic, your thesis statement must convince the reader that the rest of your paper is worth reading. If your thesis does not answer the "so what?", you may need to connect your argument to a larger issue.
  - **Does my essay support my thesis specifically and without wandering?** It's okay to change your working thesis to reflect things you have figured out in the course of writing your paper. Reassessing and revising your argument is a normal part of the writing process.<sup>1</sup>
- ★ Examples:

---

<sup>1</sup> <http://writingcenter.unc.edu/handouts/thesis-statements/>

- **Example 1: Suppose you are taking a course on 19th-century America, and the instructor hands out the following essay assignment: Compare and contrast the reasons why the North and South fought the Civil War.**
  - **Weak thesis:** *The North and South fought the Civil War for many reasons, some of which were the same and some different.*
  - This weak thesis restates the question without providing any additional information. You will expand on this new information in the body of the essay, but it is important that the reader know where you are heading. A reader of this weak thesis might think, “What reasons? How are they the same? How are they different?” Ask yourself these same questions and begin to compare Northern and Southern attitudes (perhaps you first think, “The South believed slavery was right, and the North thought slavery was wrong”). Now, push your comparison toward an interpretation—why did one side think slavery was right and the other side think it was wrong?
  - **Working thesis:** *While both sides fought the Civil War over the issue of slavery, the North fought for moral reasons while the South fought to preserve its own institutions.*
  - Included in this working thesis is a reason for the war and some idea of how the two sides disagreed over this reason. As you write the essay, you will probably begin to characterize these differences more precisely, and your working thesis may start to seem too vague. Maybe you decide that both sides fought for moral reasons, and that they just focused on different moral issues.
  - **Final thesis:** *While both Northerners and Southerners believed they fought against tyranny and oppression, Northerners focused on the oppression of slaves while Southerners defended their own right to self-government.*
  - Compare this to the original weak thesis. This final thesis presents a way of interpreting evidence that illuminates the significance of the question. Keep in mind that this is one of many possible interpretations of the Civil War—it is not the one and only right answer to the question. There isn’t one right answer; there are only strong and weak thesis statements and strong and weak uses of evidence.
- **Example 2: Suppose your literature professor hands out the following assignment in a class on the American novel: Write an analysis of some aspect of Mark Twain’s novel *Huckleberry Finn*.**
  - **Weak thesis:** *Mark Twain’s Huckleberry Finn is a great American novel.*

- Why is this thesis weak? Think about what the reader would expect from the essay that follows: you will most likely provide a general, appreciative summary of Twain’s novel. The question did not ask you to summarize; it asked you to analyze. Your professor is probably not interested in your opinion of the novel; instead, she wants you to think about *why* it’s such a great novel—what do Huck’s adventures tell us about life, about America, about coming of age, about race relations, etc.? First, the question asks you to pick an aspect of the novel that you think is important to its structure or meaning—for example, the role of storytelling, the contrasting scenes between the shore and the river, or the relationships between adults and children.
- **Working thesis:** *In Huckleberry Finn, Mark Twain develops a contrast between life on the river and life on the shore.*
- Here’s a working thesis with potential: you have highlighted an important aspect of the novel for investigation; however, it’s still not clear what your analysis will reveal. Your reader is intrigued, but is still thinking, “So what? What’s the point of this contrast? What does it signify?” Perhaps you are not sure yet, either. That’s fine—begin to work on comparing scenes from the book and see what you discover. Free write, make lists, jot down Huck’s actions and reactions. Eventually you will be able to clarify for yourself, and then for the reader, why this contrast matters.
- **Final thesis:** *Through its contrasting river and shore scenes, Twain’s Huckleberry Finn suggests that to find the true expression of American democratic ideals, one must leave “civilized” society and go back to nature.*
- This final thesis statement presents an interpretation of a literary work based on an analysis of its content. Of course, for the essay itself to be successful, you must now present evidence from the novel that will convince the reader of your interpretation.<sup>2</sup>

### *Part 2: Discussion Questions*

- ★ What processes/methods do you use when coming up with a thesis statement?
- ★ What’s the biggest problem you run into when formulating a thesis statement?
- ★ Why are thesis statements so important? How do they function in a paper?

### *Part 3: Activity*

---

<sup>2</sup> <http://writingcenter.unc.edu/handouts/thesis-statements/>

- ★ Mock assignment about a topic that everyone will be familiar with (e.g. Omelettes in Mather)
  - Sample prompt: Is it worth waiting in line to get an omelette at Mather? Why or why not?
  - Break off into pairs or small groups and come up with 2 different theses that answer the prompt, one “weak” and one “strong”
  - After 8-10 minutes, go around the room and discuss what everyone came up with

## **Thesis Statements: Handout**

- ★ A thesis statement...

- shows how you interpret the significance of your topic.
  - is a road map for the paper; in other words, it tells the reader what to expect from the rest of the paper.
  - directly answers the question asked of you, or that you ask yourself. A thesis is an *interpretation* of a question or subject, not a statement explaining the subject itself. The subject, or topic, of an essay might be World War II or Moby Dick; a thesis must then offer a way to understand the war or the novel.
  - is arguable; a thesis should make a claim that others might dispute.
  - usually appears at the end of your first paragraph and presents your argument to the reader. The rest of the paper provides evidence that will persuade the reader of the logic of your thesis.
- ★ Questions to ask yourself:
- **Do I answer the question?** Return to the prompt after constructing a working thesis to ensure that your argument specifically addresses the focus of the question.
  - **Have I taken a position that others might challenge or oppose?** After writing your thesis, try coming up with a statement that challenges your interpretation. If you can't, your thesis is not debatable enough, and may be a summary rather than an interpretation.
  - **Is my thesis statement specific enough?** Thesis statements that are too vague often do not have strong arguments. For example, if your thesis states that something is "successful," you must explain what *specifically* makes it "successful." Your thesis should always address the "why?" and/or the "how?", not just the "what?"
  - **Does my thesis pass the "So what?" test?** In addition to presenting an interpretation of a topic, your thesis statement must convince the reader that the rest of your paper is worth reading. If your thesis does not answer the "so what?", you may need to connect your argument to a larger issue.
  - **Does my essay support my thesis specifically and without wandering?** It's okay to change your working thesis to reflect things you have figured out in the course of writing your paper. Reassessing and revising your argument is a normal part of the writing process.<sup>3</sup>
- ★ Examples:
- **Example 1: Suppose you are taking a course on 19th-century America, and the instructor hands out the following essay assignment: Compare and contrast the reasons why the North and South fought the Civil War.**

---

<sup>3</sup> <http://writingcenter.unc.edu/handouts/thesis-statements/>

- **Weak thesis:** *The North and South fought the Civil War for many reasons, some of which were the same and some different.*
  - This weak thesis restates the question without providing any additional information. You will expand on this new information in the body of the essay, but it is important that the reader know where you are heading. A reader of this weak thesis might think, “What reasons? How are they the same? How are they different?” Ask yourself these same questions and begin to compare Northern and Southern attitudes (perhaps you first think, “The South believed slavery was right, and the North thought slavery was wrong”). Now, push your comparison toward an interpretation—why did one side think slavery was right and the other side think it was wrong?
  - **Working thesis:** *While both sides fought the Civil War over the issue of slavery, the North fought for moral reasons while the South fought to preserve its own institutions.*
  - Included in this working thesis is a reason for the war and some idea of how the two sides disagreed over this reason. As you write the essay, you will probably begin to characterize these differences more precisely, and your working thesis may start to seem too vague. Maybe you decide that both sides fought for moral reasons, and that they just focused on different moral issues.
  - **Final thesis:** *While both Northerners and Southerners believed they fought against tyranny and oppression, Northerners focused on the oppression of slaves while Southerners defended their own right to self-government.*
  - Compare this to the original weak thesis. This final thesis presents a way of interpreting evidence that illuminates the significance of the question. Keep in mind that this is one of many possible interpretations of the Civil War—it is not the one and only right answer to the question. There isn’t one right answer; there are only strong and weak thesis statements and strong and weak uses of evidence.
- **Example 2: Suppose your literature professor hands out the following assignment in a class on the American novel: Write an analysis of some aspect of Mark Twain’s novel *Huckleberry Finn*.**
- **Weak thesis:** *Mark Twain’s Huckleberry Finn is a great American novel.*
  - Why is this thesis weak? Think about what the reader would expect from the essay that follows: you will most likely provide a general, appreciative summary of Twain’s novel. The question did not ask you

to summarize; it asked you to analyze. Your professor is probably not interested in your opinion of the novel; instead, she wants you to think about *why* it's such a great novel—what do Huck's adventures tell us about life, about America, about coming of age, about race relations, etc.? First, the question asks you to pick an aspect of the novel that you think is important to its structure or meaning—for example, the role of storytelling, the contrasting scenes between the shore and the river, or the relationships between adults and children.

- **Working thesis:** *In Huckleberry Finn, Mark Twain develops a contrast between life on the river and life on the shore.*
- Here's a working thesis with potential: you have highlighted an important aspect of the novel for investigation; however, it's still not clear what your analysis will reveal. Your reader is intrigued, but is still thinking, "So what? What's the point of this contrast? What does it signify?" Perhaps you are not sure yet, either. That's fine—begin to work on comparing scenes from the book and see what you discover. Free write, make lists, jot down Huck's actions and reactions. Eventually you will be able to clarify for yourself, and then for the reader, why this contrast matters.
- **Final thesis:** *Through its contrasting river and shore scenes, Twain's Huckleberry Finn suggests that to find the true expression of American democratic ideals, one must leave "civilized" society and go back to nature.*
- This final thesis statement presents an interpretation of a literary work based on an analysis of its content. Of course, for the essay itself to be successful, you must now present evidence from the novel that will convince the reader of your interpretation.<sup>4</sup>

### *Discussion Questions*

- ★ What process/methods do you use when coming up with a thesis statement?

---

<sup>4</sup> <http://writingcenter.unc.edu/handouts/thesis-statements/>

★ What's the biggest problem you run into when formulating a thesis statement?

★ Why are thesis statements so important? How do they function in a paper?

*Group Activity*

**Imagine you are given the following prompt: Is it worth waiting in line to get an omelette at Mather? Why or why not? In pairs or small groups, come up with 2 different theses that answer the prompt, one "weak" and one "strong"**

*Weak thesis:*

*Strong thesis:*