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Welcome to the Purdue OWL

https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/general_writing/academic_writing/establishing_arguments/index.html

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Developing Strong Thesis Statements

The thesis statement or main claim must be debatable

An argumentative or persuasive piece of writing must begin with a debatable thesis or claim. In other words, the thesis must be something that people could reasonably have differing opinions on. If your thesis is something that is generally agreed upon or accepted as fact then there is no reason to try to persuade people.

Example of a non-debatable thesis statement:

PARTNER CONTENT

**Upload your paper & get a free
Expert Check**

Get a real writing expert to proofread your paper before you
turn it in

Paste your paper here!

Check my paper

Using paper checkers responsibly

(https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/research_and_citation/using_paper_checkers_responsibly.html)



Pollution is bad for the environment.

This thesis statement is not debatable. First, the word *pollution* implies that something is bad or negative in some way. Furthermore, all studies agree that pollution is a problem; they simply disagree on the impact it will have or the scope of the problem. No one could reasonably argue that pollution is unambiguously good.

Example of a debatable thesis statement:

At least 25 percent of the federal budget should be spent on limiting pollution.

This is an example of a debatable thesis because reasonable people could disagree with it. Some people might think that this is how we should spend the nation's money. Others might feel that we should be spending more money on education. Still others could argue that corporations, not the government, should be paying to limit pollution.

Another example of a debatable thesis statement:

America's anti-pollution efforts should focus on privately owned cars.

In this example there is also room for disagreement between rational individuals. Some citizens might think focusing on recycling programs rather than private automobiles is the most effective strategy.

The thesis needs to be narrow

Although the scope of your paper might seem overwhelming at the start, generally the narrower the thesis the more effective your argument will be. Your thesis or claim must be supported by evidence. The broader your claim is, the more evidence you will need to convince readers that your position is right.

Example of a thesis that is too broad:

Drug use is detrimental to society.

There are several reasons this statement is too broad to argue. First, what is included in the category "drugs"? Is the author talking about illegal drug use, recreational drug use (which might include alcohol and cigarettes), or all uses of medication in general? Second, in what ways are drugs detrimental? Is drug use causing deaths (and is the author equating deaths from overdoses and deaths from drug related violence)? Is drug use changing the moral climate or causing the economy to decline? Finally, what does the author mean by "society"? Is the author referring only to America or to the global population? Does the author make any distinction between the effects on children and adults? There are just too many questions that the claim leaves open. The author could not cover all of the topics listed above, yet the generality of the claim leaves all of these possibilities open to debate.

Example of a narrow or focused thesis:

Illegal drug use is detrimental because it encourages gang violence.

In this example the topic of drugs has been narrowed down to illegal drugs and the detriment has been narrowed down to gang violence. This is a much more manageable topic.

We could narrow each debatable thesis from the previous examples in the following way:

Narrowed debatable thesis 1:

At least 25 percent of the federal budget should be spent on helping upgrade business to clean technologies, researching renewable energy sources, and planting more trees in order to control or eliminate pollution.

This thesis narrows the scope of the argument by specifying not just the amount of money used but also how the money could actually help to control pollution.

Narrowed debatable thesis 2:

America's anti-pollution efforts should focus on privately owned cars because it would allow most citizens to contribute to national efforts and care about the outcome.

This thesis narrows the scope of the argument by specifying not just what the focus of a national anti-pollution campaign should be but also why this is the appropriate focus.

Qualifiers such as "*typically*," "*generally*," "*usually*," or "*on average*" also help to limit the scope of your claim by allowing for the almost inevitable exception to the rule.

Types of claims

Claims typically fall into one of four categories. Thinking about how you want to approach your topic, or, in other words, what type of claim you want to make, is one way to focus your thesis on one particular aspect of your broader topic.

Claims of fact or definition: These claims argue about what the definition of something is or whether something is a settled fact. Example:

While some pundits have framed a four-year college education as something necessary for adult success, this notion should not be treated as a given.

Claims of cause and effect: These claims argue that one person, thing, or event caused another thing or event to occur. Example:

Federal student loan policies have contributed to widespread growth in college tuition.

Claims about value: These are claims made of what something is worth, whether we value it or not, how we would rate or categorize something. Example:

The student debt crisis is one of the most serious problems facing the country today.

Claims about solutions or policies: These are claims that argue for or against a certain solution or policy approach to a problem. Example:

Rather than encouraging all students to attend four-year colleges, we should instead emphasize the validity of two-year colleges, technical schools, and trade schools as well.

Which type of claim is right for your argument? Which type of thesis or claim you use for your argument will depend on your position and knowledge of the topic, your audience, and the context of your paper. You might want to think about where you imagine your audience to be on this topic and pinpoint where you think the biggest difference in viewpoints might be. Even if you start with one type of claim you probably will be using several within the paper. Regardless of the type of claim you choose to utilize it is key to identify the controversy or debate you are addressing and to define your position early on in the paper.

Introduction Paragraphs ..



It is true that the first impression—whether it's a first meeting with a person or the first sentence of a paper—sets the stage for a lasting impression. The introductory paragraph of any paper, long or short, should start with a sentence that peaks the interest of readers. In a typical essay, that first sentence leads into two or three other statements that provide details about the writer's subject or process. All of these sentences build up to the essay's thesis statement.

The introduction paragraph typically has:

- Attention-Getter (Lead-in)
- Set Up for the Thesis
- Thesis/Essay Map

Attention Getters & Lead-ins

To get a paper off to a great start, writers should try to have a first sentence that **engages** their reader. This first sentence should be **broadly related** to the topic of the essay.

Ways writers can begin:

Paradoxical or Intriguing Statement

Shocking Statement or Statistic

Rhetorical Question

Anecdote

Statement of the Problem

Proverb, Maxim, or Strong Statement

Set Up for a Thesis

After the attention getter or lead-in, writers need to gradually narrow the broad subject towards the thesis.

Gradually narrowing can:

provide **background** information,
explain underlying information,

describe the **complexity** of the issue,
introduce various **layers** of the subject, and
help **transition** from these more broad ideas to the narrow thesis.

Thesis Statements

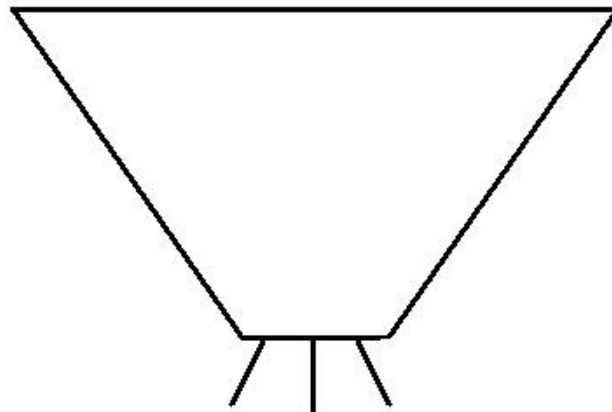
A thesis statement manages to encapsulate an essay's main argument in a succinct, one-sentence comment. Beginner writers often times find it useful to create an *essay map thesis*, where the thesis briefly lists the areas that will be discussed in the essay.

A Thesis Statement:
has a clearly stated **opinion**,
but does **not bluntly announce** the opinion ("In this essay I will..."),
is **narrow** enough to write a focused essay,
but is also **broad** enough to write at least 3 body paragraphs,
is clearly stated in **specific** terms,
is **easily recognized** as the main idea,
is forceful and **direct**,
is **not softened** with token phrases ("in my opinion" or "I think"), and
can list the 3 main points that will be made.

In the Introduction Paragraph NEVER EVER EVER. . .

bluntly **announce** the essay's intent ("In this essay I will..."),
make **unreasonable** statements,
apologize for the material that is being written ("In my humble opinion..."),
go into a **detailed account** of the writing,
include **random information** that has nothing to do with the essay,
use an encyclopedia or **dictionary definition** ("According to Webster's..."), and
dilly-dally. Get to it. Move confidently into the essay.

Question: How is this a graphical representation of an introduction Paragraph?



Answer: Because it starts broad, and gradually narrows towards a focused, but not overly specific thesis. The thesis is specific enough to fully explore the essay, but it's not so specific that there is nothing more to write about.

Sample Introduction Paragraph

.....**[Attention-Getter]** After the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on New York's World Trade Towers and the Pentagon, the debate surrounding racial profiling in airports intensified. Many people believed that profiling was the best way to identify possible terrorists, but many others worried about violations of civil liberties. While some airports began to target passengers based solely on their Middle Eastern origins, others instituted random searches instead. **[Begin setting-up the thesis]** Neither of these techniques seems likely to eliminate terrorism. Now many experts in the government and in airport security are recommending the use of a national ID card or Safe Traveler Card. **[Thesis]** If every US citizen had such a card, airlines could screen for terrorists more effectively than they do now and avoid procedures that single out individuals solely on the basis of race.

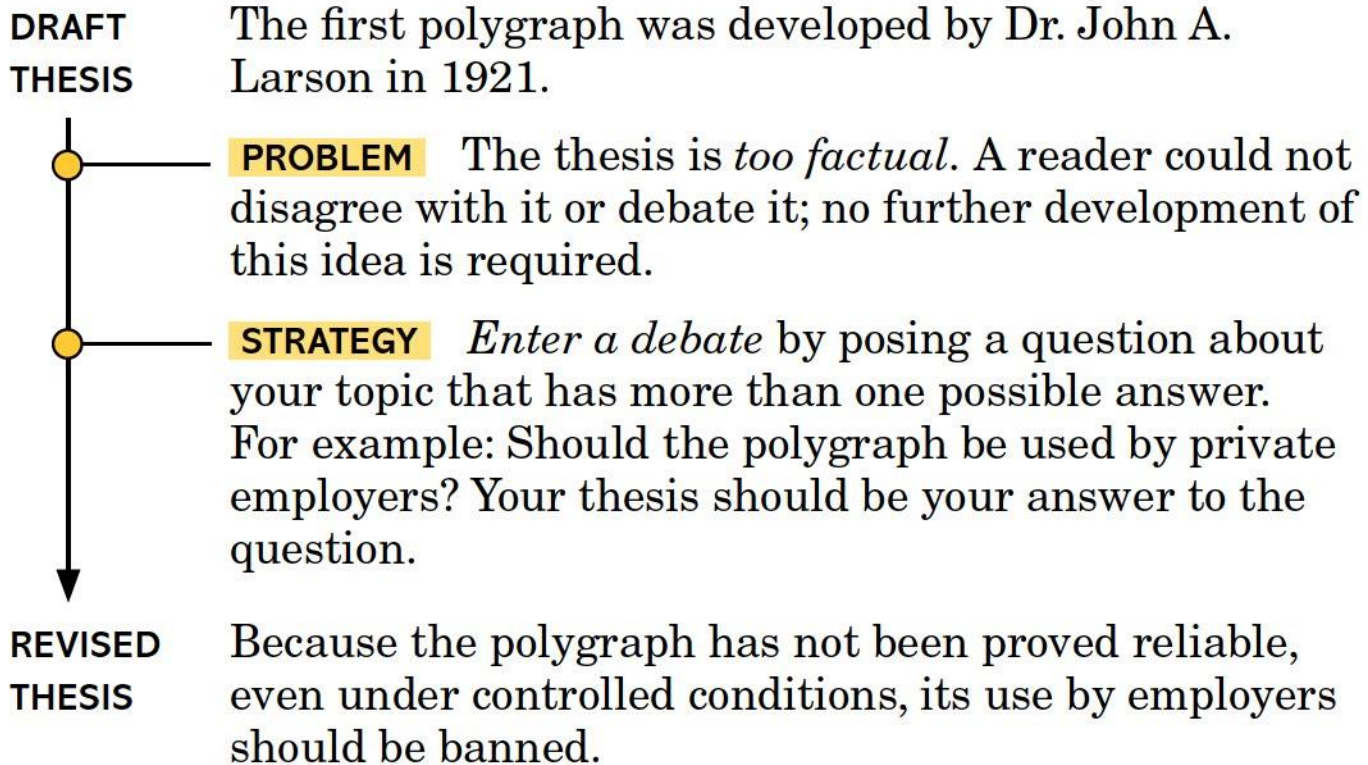
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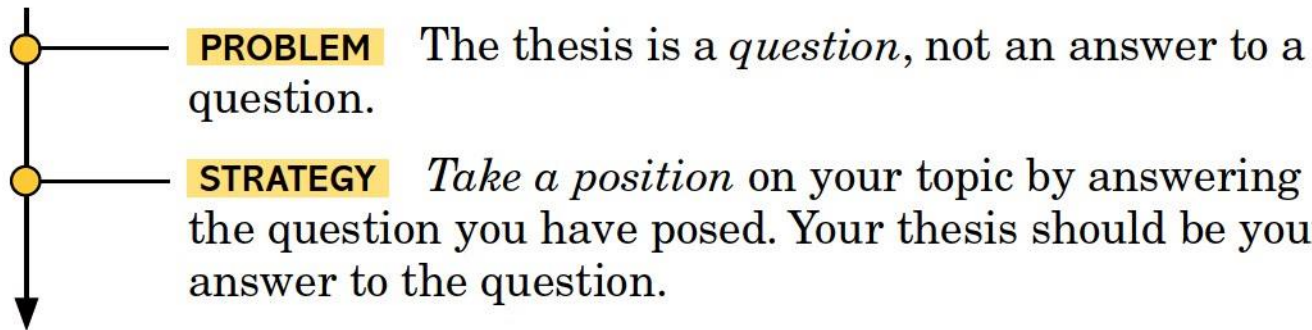
Writing an Effective Thesis



Writing an Effective Thesis

A thesis should be an answer to a question, not a question itself.

DRAFT THESIS Would John F. Kennedy have continued to escalate the war in Vietnam if he had lived?



REVISED THESIS Although John F. Kennedy sent the first American troops to Vietnam before he died, an analysis of his foreign policy suggests that he would not have escalated the war had he lived.

Writing an Effective Thesis

A thesis should be of sufficient scope for your assignment; it should not be too broad.

DRAFT
THESIS

Mapping the human genome has many implications for health and science.



PROBLEM The thesis is *too broad*. Even in a very long research paper, you would not be able to discuss all the implications of mapping the human genome.



STRATEGY Consider *subtopics of your original topic*. Once you have chosen a subtopic, take a position in an ongoing debate and pose a question that has more than one answer. For example: Should people be tested for genetic diseases? Your thesis should be your answer to the question.

REVISED
THESIS

Although scientists can now detect genetic predisposition for specific diseases, policymakers should establish guidelines about whom to test and under what circumstances.

Writing an Effective Thesis

A thesis also should not be too narrow.

DRAFT
THESIS

A person who carries a genetic mutation linked to a particular disease might or might not develop that disease.



PROBLEM The thesis is *too narrow*. It does not suggest any argument or debate about the topic.



STRATEGY *Identify challenging questions* that readers might have about your topic. Then pose a question that has more than one answer. For example: Do the risks of genetic testing outweigh its usefulness? Your thesis should be your answer to this question.



REVISED
THESIS

Though positive results in a genetic test do not guarantee that the disease will develop, such results can cause psychological trauma; genetic testing should therefore be avoided in most cases.

Writing an Effective Thesis

A thesis should be sharply focused, not too vague. Avoid fuzzy, hard-to-define words such as *interesting*, *good*, or *disgusting*.

DRAFT
THESIS

The Vietnam Veterans Memorial is an interesting structure.



PROBLEM This thesis is *too fuzzy and unfocused*. It's difficult to define *interesting*, and the sentence doesn't give the reader any cues about where the essay is going.



STRATEGY *Focus your thesis with concrete language and a clear plan.* Pose a question about the topic that has more than one answer. For example: How does the physical structure of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial shape the experience of visitors? Your thesis — your answer to the question — should use specific language that engages readers to follow your argument.



REVISED
THESIS

By inviting visitors to see their own reflections in the wall, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial creates a link between the present and the past.

Testing a Working Thesis

Once you have come up with a working thesis, you can use the following questions to evaluate it.

- Does your thesis answer a question, propose a solution to a problem, or take a position in a debate?
- Does the thesis require an essay's worth of development? Or will you run out of points too quickly?
- Is the thesis too obvious? If you cannot come up with interpretations that oppose your own, consider revising your thesis.
- Can you support your thesis with the evidence available?
- Can you explain why readers will want to read an essay with this thesis? Can you respond when a reader asks "So what?"

Moving from Topic to Thesis

Read this when
writing papers...



so you don't end up
looking like this guy!

What will I learn in this presentation?

- This presentation was created to help you understand how to organize all of the notes, journal entries, and discussion postings you've written so that you can develop a THESIS for your essay or research paper.

What is the Difference Between Topic and Thesis?

In a nutshell, your topic is general and your thesis is specific.

Topic

Once you have decided on a topic to write about, there are still many steps to take before you can really write about it. A topic is general. It is a category, frequently expressed in a single word, such as "alcoholism" or "teenage mothers." Whole books have been written on these topics or even on subtopics of these topics, such as "the causes of alcoholism." Even these subtopics are too general for the purpose of writing a short essay, so as the writer, you need to narrow your topic further, making it more specific.

It's Like Math...

Thesis = Assertion + Pattern of Organization

You need to come up with an idea you want to express or a point you want to make. This point or idea is called your **assertion**. Your assertion will express a point, idea, opinion, or a view about your topic. Your thesis will contain a topic and an assertion about that topic. Your thesis will also **imply the way you will organize** your ideas.

How do I come up with a topic?

To come up with a topic, look over your journals and worksheets about the book. As you skim and scan, make a list of words that come to mind about the book.

Now, list some ideas about the “text.”

A large, empty rectangular box with a white border, occupying the central portion of the slide. It is intended for the user to list ideas about the text.

How do I narrow my topic?

One way to get from the very general terms shown in the previous slide to more specific thesis-type phrases and statements is to brainstorm questions related to these words. In order to brainstorm questions in a productive manner, I suggest you use the following heuristic, or guiding structure, to help you. Think of the following general interrogative words and use them when you try to formulate your questions:

who...what...when...where...why...how...could...should...

Also think of the following interrogative phrases which will help you develop a pattern of organization in your thesis:

in what ways...what kinds...what causes...what effects...what reasons...

what steps...what influences...what similarities...what differences...

Combining to Create Questions

- Now simply choose a topic word and match it with an interrogative word or phrase and make a list of questions about your topic. Obviously, also be sure to set your question in the context of the book you are writing about.

Now you try it.

Create your own question now by matching interrogative words and phrases with some ideas from the book. Write these down now.

Interrogative Words and Phrases	Ideas about the book
<p>interrogative words</p> <p>when where why how could should</p> <p>interrogative phrases</p> <p>in what ways what kinds what causes what effects what reasons what steps what influences what similarities what differences</p>	

Combining to Create Questions

- What kind
- What kind of
- How does
- How does
- In what ways
- In what ways
- What effects
- When
- Why
- Where
- What happens
- With whom
- What are similarities between
- What are differences between
- What led to

Ok, I have some questions prepared. Now, how do I construct a thesis statement?

By simply changing the questions into statements you can invent possible thesis statements for an essay. However, you have to be sure that your thesis has two very important components:

- A thesis statement must **make an assertion**.
- A thesis statement must **imply a pattern of organization**.

Repeat the process.

This questioning and statement-forming process can be repeated for different topics that you have brainstormed. Or, if you are sure of your topic, work with more of the questions and statements. Students have found this simple process easy and useful if they take the time to experiment with more than one topic and with more questions.

Take your time.

Don't just go through the process to arrive at one statement. Work through until you find several thesis statements and write the essay that you think allows you the opportunity to make the strongest case. The act of brainstorming and thinking of questions will help you come up with more ideas to write about as you refine your thinking about this book.

As with all writing, be patient, take time and care, and try to enjoy it!

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