

Developing a Thesis Statement

What is a thesis?

A thesis is the central claim or main argument of an essay. Because it provides a unifying theme for the rest of the essay, a thesis statement typically appears early on—in shorter papers, most often within the first paragraph or two. The thesis should be analytic or interpretive rather than merely descriptive or factual. Constructing an original and clear thesis statement is essential to writing an effective argumentative essay.

The term *thesis statement* often misleads students into thinking a central claim must be stated in a single sentence. Indeed, articulating a complex argument often requires more than that; you might need two or more sentences to adequately present your thesis. While there are no hard and fast rules about how to express a thesis, or how long a thesis statement may be, there *are* strategies you can employ to develop a strong claim and criteria you can use to evaluate the efficacy of your claim.

The working thesis: your helpful guide from outlining to drafting to revising

When you draft an argumentative essay, you'll typically begin with a *working thesis*—a thesis statement that you might not be entirely sure about yet, but that offers a basis for you to begin a discussion. Throughout the process of writing your essay, your thesis will evolve and become sharper. As you write, you're likely to reconsider your main ideas as well as the evidence for and against them, and your central argument is likely to change along the way. It is therefore helpful to think of the thesis as serving two purposes: (1) as a guide to motivate and structure your first drafts and (2) as the central organizing idea of your final draft. In effect, you will have a *working thesis* that guides your outlining and drafting and then a revised and more polished *final thesis* that encapsulates your thoughtful and thorough consideration of all the evidence.

Drafting a working thesis

Brainstorm about what questions surround your chosen topic. Does the assignment or prompt you are responding to offer inspiration for a claim? What do you think is interesting about your topic? Are there any controversies or debates to which you can contribute?

Once you have generated a list of interesting, analytical questions, consider the possible answers. Can you narrow your inquiry to a central, overriding question and answer? You're ready to draft a working thesis! Focus on the relationship between the outcome in which you are interested and what you think causes this result. Think about the justifications or rationale for this argument. If you are having difficulty articulating a thesis, try expressing the pieces of your claim in bullet points or use a template (see below). By identifying a central argument, a working thesis gives your draft a unifying and organizing idea.

Templates

If you are having difficulty developing a thesis statement, you might find it helpful to use a formulaic template to help you articulate what you plan to argue. Although they don't make for great prose, such templates force you to think directly about your claims. Try one or both of the following:

I am studying _____ because I want to find out
_____ in order to understand
_____.

In this paper, I will argue _____, based
on the evidence of _____. This
issue is important because _____.

Evaluating your thesis statement

As you draft your working thesis, evaluate its efficacy (that is, how effective it is). A strong thesis will be:

- **Contestable:** Intentionally writing a thesis that someone can disagree with may seem counterintuitive, but consider that if no one could possibly disagree with what you're arguing, there's little point in writing about it. Being able to acknowledge and refute counterarguments will strengthen your claim, not weaken it.
 - POOR: "To learn the Tango requires practice." Well, yeah, but so what? Why would readers want to read an argument in support of this claim if they already agree with it?
 - BETTER: "To learn the Tango, one must learn not only various steps but more importantly how to move with spontaneity—a skill that can be developed through practice." There is certainly room for disagreement in this claim (Is spontaneity really the most important aspect of the Tango? Can spontaneity be learned?); as a result, the revised thesis provides a much more interesting basis for discussion. The author is likely to support it more passionately than the first claim.
- **Reasonable:** While you want your thesis to be contestable, you also want it to be reasonable. Readers recognize the difference between thoughtful, critical interpretations of evidence and contortions that twist evidence around to support an unreasonable claim. A thesis can be *radical*, in the context of current dialogue on your topic, and still be *reasonable* if you have sufficient evidence to support it. Consider this somewhat radical thesis by George Orwell that connects sloppy writing habits with political downfall ("Politics and the English Language," 1946):
 - "Modern English, especially written English, is full of bad habits which spread by imitation and which can be avoided if one is willing to take the necessary trouble. [Thesis:] *If one gets rid of these habits one can think more clearly, and to think clearly is a necessary first step toward political regeneration: so that the fight against bad English is not frivolous and is not the exclusive concern of professional writers.*"

Orwell goes on to provide specific examples to support his claim, and explains why he believes writing well is a political gesture. Although he comes across as a little crusty, his thesis isn't unreasonable.

- **Specific:** Broad claims are more difficult to support effectively than focused claims. Specific claims also tend to provide readers with more useful information than broad claims.

- POOR: “Changing the public school lunch menu to include better foods would be good for students.” What constitutes “better food,” and how would it benefit students? (By the way, is this claim **contestable**?)
 - BETTER: “Changing the public school lunch menu to include more fresh fruit, vegetables, and grains would both improve our students’ health and raise their academic performance.” (Often **specific** and **contestable** go hand-in-hand.)
- **Significant:** Consider the context of the course for which you are writing your paper. Is your thesis adding anything meaningful to the current dialogue surrounding your topic? Note that as you become more familiar with the concerns of a given topic or discipline, you will be able to contribute more significantly to the discussion.
 - **Interpretive:** Does your thesis offer an interpretation of evidence or does it simply describe a situation?
 - POOR: “The United States is a federal system that divides governmental powers between national and state authorities.” Rather than offering an interpretation, this sentence describes an incontestable fact. While it may have truth value, it makes a poor thesis statement.
 - BETTER: “The division of governmental authority inherent to the United States’ federal system produces unnecessary competition between state and national jurisdictions. This division hinders the effectiveness of public policies at both levels of government.” These two sentences (note that a thesis statement might be two sentences, not just one) offer readers an interpretation. They propose a specific relationship between a cause (i.e. the U.S. federal system) and its effects (i.e. less effective public policies), as well as the rationale behind the interpretation (i.e. competition between state and national authorities).

Revising your working thesis

After finishing your rough draft, it’s time to revise. As you do so, ask whether the evidence you discuss in the body of the essay supports your working thesis. Can you make your thesis statement more specific and precise? Have you sufficiently addressed (as opposed to ignored) counterarguments that might undermine your claim? Has your position changed or evolved? In the process of revising, make sure your thesis conveys precisely what you wish to argue and that the evidence you present is immediately relevant.

Final thoughts

Remember, a strong thesis statement is direct, concise, clear, and provocative (though not intentionally outlandish or extreme). You should stake a clear and specific position—the thesis is no place to be vague and indecisive!—that strives to generate discussion about a certain aspect of your topic. In other words, your claim should be contestable, open to reasoned argument and debate. Ideally, your thesis should focus on one main idea. If you have lots of good ideas on the subject but are writing a short paper, choose what you think is the strongest or most important argument and make it your thesis.