Campus Academic Resource Program
Thesis Statements

This handout will:
- Define a thesis statement
- Describe the function of a thesis statement
- Specify the different parts of a thesis statement
- Provide an exercise to test knowledge of thesis statement components
- Distinguish the three types of thesis statements
- Supply an exercise to test knowledge of types of thesis statements.
- Detail the conditions that must be met when writing a thesis statement
- Illustrate the most common mistakes in thesis writing
- Explain how to develop a thesis statement
- Offer a thesis statement checklist exercise

What is a Thesis Statement?
A **thesis statement** is a concise explanation of the main claims of an essay. It is usually 1-3 sentences in length. The thesis statement is generally positioned at the end of an introduction paragraph, and it is developed and supported by the body of the essay. Writing that requires a thesis statement varies from statements of purpose to project proposals, making thesis writing an important skill for many different professions and fields.

Hint: The 1-3 sentence limit is a guideline, not a steadfast rule. Thesis statements can be longer, especially if you are writing a paper of significant length.

What is the Function of a Thesis Statement?
A well-written thesis statement informs the reader of what will be addressed or argued in the paper. It functions like a **plan** or a **promise**.

A thesis functions like a **plan** because it outlines what topics will be covered in the body of your essay. A thesis functions like a **promise** because you are obligated to address all the components of your thesis in your paper. Your thesis statement creates a base structure for argumentative and/or informative writing and lets your audience know the path your argument will take.

- Example: The benefits of knitting are both physical and mental. It has been shown to increase finger dexterity, concentration, and if practiced for 3 years or more, knitting will help you remain patient in trying scenarios.

This thesis statement **promises** to inform the reader about the physical and mental benefits of knitting. It **plans** to do so by explaining how knitting has been shown to increase finger dexterity, concentration, and patience. It **promises** to go through with this plan.

Four Components of a Thesis Statement
1. The **topic**. The **topic** reflects the subject matter of the paper. In a cover letter, the topic is the position the writer is applying for. In an argumentative essay, the topic is what the writer will argue about. *The topic of a paper can often be found within a writing prompt.*

- Example: For your doomsday preparation final, review the disaster scenarios we have covered this semester, including zombie outbreak, solar flare, super volcano, and nuclear war. Choose one scenario and write a 5-7 page paper that explains whether or not your chosen scenario is likely to happen as well as the possible causes of it.

The topic embedded in this prompt could be a zombie outbreak, solar flare, super volcano, or nuclear war.

2. The **position, opinion, or claim**. In this portion, the writer takes a position on the topic. This segment of the thesis can be an argument for or against the topic, or it can be an opinion/claim that can be proved with sufficient evidence.

- Example: A zombie outbreak is inevitable because X,Y, and Z

The claim in this thesis statement is that a zombie outbreak is inevitable.

3. The **subordinate clause** *(optional)*. Sometimes when writing a thesis statement, it is beneficial to include a subordinate clause. A subordinate clause is a phrase or statement of an opposing argument used in order to set up the writer's counter-argument. Popular subordinate clauses include: *despite, in spite of, although, even though, though, etc.* For example, if arguing for the possibility of an imminent zombie apocalypse, the writer would begin with one of the opposing viewpoints.

- Example: Although there have been no widely proven cases regarding the reanimation of the deceased, X, Y, and Z.

The subordinate clause in this thesis is "although."

4. The **support.** The support is a claim or claims containing evidence the writer will use to prove their position. This is the X, Y, and Z of the thesis, but keep in mind you do not necessarily need three supporting claims.

- Example: (with subordinate clause) *Although there have been no widely proven cases regarding the reanimation of the deceased*, private companies are pouring money into scientific research regarding stem cells, nanotechnology, and biologically enhanced super-foods that will inevitably lead to a zombie outbreak.

- Example: (without subordinate clause): A zombie outbreak is inevitable because private companies are pouring money into stem cell research, nanotechnology, and biologically enhanced super-foods, which all have the potential to turn humans into zombies.

Exercise 1: Identifying the Parts of a Thesis Statement
After reviewing the different parts of a thesis statement, take time to identify each of these parts in a few example sentences.

- Example 1: Despite the fact that my midi-chlorian count is only slightly higher than average, I am an ideal candidate for the Jedi academy because I am able to maintain inner-peace during

stressful situations. Also, I have had extensive training with a lightsaber, and I can move boulder-sized objects using the force.

Find the topic:

_____

Find the position, opinion, or claim:

_____

Find the subordinate clause (if present):

_____

Find the support:

_____

- Example 2: Although the plot of Roald Dahl's *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* appears to be a "rags to riches" story about Charlie Bucket, it is actually a critique of the rising tide of consumer culture. The plights of Augustus Gloop, Veruca Salt, Violet Beauregarde, and Mike Teavee warn against the hazards of a culture that encourages instant gratification.

Find the topic:

_____

Find the position, opinion, or claim:

_____

Find the subordinate clause (if present):

_____

Find the support:

_____

The Three Types of Thesis Statements
It is important to understand the different types of thesis statements to tailor them to a specific audience, context, and topic. The three types of thesis statements are:

1. **Expository thesis statements**. In an expository thesis statement you are presenting information. The information is based on empirical evidence, scientific data, or historical facts.

- <u>Example:</u> Through an examination of multiple studies conducted by the California Department of Corrections, it is clear first-time prison inmates assigned to a security housing unit recidivate at a higher rate than their counterparts despite their race, gender, or crime committed (CDCR 48).

This is an expository thesis statement because it presents the reader with information about the efficacy of security housing units based on a study of recidivism rates.

2. **Analytical thesis statements**. Analytical thesis statements are often phrased in terms of cause and effect. These thesis statements evaluate the components of a subject, issue, text, etc. and try to determine how the components contributed to a certain outcome or effect.

- <u>Example:</u> During the Victorian Era, London suffered a massive cholera outbreak. Cholera was spread through contaminated drinking water caused by overcrowding, unsanitary living conditions, a lack of indoor plumbing, and a poorly mapped sewage system.

This is an analytical thesis statement because it explains what factors caused the cholera outbreak during the Victorian Era.

3. **Persuasive Thesis Statements**. Persuasive thesis statements make a claim about a topic with the ultimate goal of persuading the audience that the claim is correct based on the evidence provided in the body of the paper.

- <u>Example:</u> Due to the fact that isolating prisoners in security housing units has long term effects on their mental health and contributes to higher recidivism rates, the California Department of Corrections should end the use of SHU's (CDRC 48).

This is a persuasive thesis statement because it claims that the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation should end the use of security housing units because of the SHU's impact on the inmates' mental health and recidivism rates.

Exercise 2: Determining the Different Types of Thesis Statements
Once you have read the descriptions of different thesis statements, circle which type of thesis statement matches the following examples.

- <u>Example 1</u>: It is clear that James Weldon Johnson's writing impacted the writing of Ralph Ellison. By examining the use of first person narration, the bildungsroman story arch, and the lack of character names in both *The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man* and *Invisible Man*, a relationship between the works and their authors will be established.

| Expository | Analytical | Persuasive |

- <u>Example 2</u>: When watching the film *There Will Be Blood* the audience is confronted with an overwhelming sense of menace due to the minimal dialogue and Jonny Greenwood's film score.

| Expository | Analytical | Persuasive |

- Example 3: Through the use of classroom observation and rating scales, studies have shown that children who eat breakfast in the morning do better in school on the basis of behavior, cognition, and school performance (Adolphus, Lawton, & Dye, 2013). Therefore, the San Francisco Unified School District (SFUSD) should provide free breakfast to students before school in the cafeteria.

Expository   Analytical   Persuasive

Conditions that Constitute a Thesis
A thesis statement must be **specific** and it must be **arguable**.

A thesis statement must be **specific**, meaning it must avoid unclear terminology and must reflect the scope of the paper. For example, if you are writing a 3 page paper, you cannot cover a topic like the history of the Roman Empire.

A thesis must be **arguable**. In order for it to be arguable it must present a view that someone might reasonably contest. It should not be a statement of basic fact or common knowledge. You must use the evidence in your body paragraphs to prove or ague your thesis statement.

Common Mistakes
It is important to understand the conditions that constitute a thesis in order to avoid writing a thesis statement that is either *too broad or non-arguable*.

- Example of a broad thesis: Rehabilitation is beneficial for prisoners.

This sentence is too broad because:

1. The term "rehabilitation" has various connotations. What does it mean to rehabilitate someone? Is the author talking about treating a drug problem? Is the author discussing therapy and/or education for criminal behavior?
2. The thesis does not specify how rehabilitation is beneficial for prisoners. Does it help them get a job after prison? Does it help them learn important social skills? Does it help them deal with anger?
3. It is unclear what kind/type of prisoners are being rehabilitated. Would rehabilitating violent criminals be the same for prisoners who committed non-violent offenses?

- Example of a specific thesis: Education is a form of rehabilitation that is beneficial for non-violent prisoners because it gives them the critical thinking and communication skills necessary to become productive members of their community.

In this example, the type of rehabilitation has been specified by:

1. Clarifying the type of rehabilitation: educational rehabilitation
2. Clarifying the type of prisoners who will be rehabilitated: non-violent
3. Explaining how/why rehabilitation is beneficial: it gives non-violent inmates critical thinking and communication skills.

- <u>Example of a non-arguable thesis:</u> Smoking is bad for your health.

This thesis statement is not arguable because it has been widely proven that smoking is bad for your health. Currently the debate about smoking centers on how much it affects the smoker's and others' bodies. It is nearly impossible to argue that smoking is good for our health using credible sources.

- <u>Example of an arguable thesis:</u> The U.S. government should increase the tax on cigarettes.

This thesis statement is arguable because:
1. Someone may disagree that the government should tax the consumers more on a product just because it can be detrimental to their health.
2. A person might argue that increased taxes impede their right to smoke.
3. Some might think that instead of taxing the consumer, the government could be finding a way to disrupt the wealthy tobacco companies.

While this thesis statement is arguable, it lacks specificity.

- <u>Example of a specific and arguable thesis:</u> In order to decrease smoking rates, the U.S. government should increase the tax on cigarettes for consumers.

This example is specific because:
1. It tells the audience who is doing the taxing and to whom it is being done.
2. The reason for taxing cigarettes is specific: to decrease smoking rates.

This example is arguable because:
1. Someone can disagree with different aspects of the statement, such as whether the government should be involved or not.

How to Develop a Thesis

- <u>Consider</u> what your assignment is asking of you. Are you informing your reader? Are you persuading your reader? Are you performing analysis? You can annotate your prompt like you would any other piece of writing. What are the key words? What are the primary and secondary questions being asked of you? Make sure to read the prompt thoroughly before determining what action to take.

- <u>Identify</u> a **topic**. For example, if your professor is asking you to analyze the function of disguise in Shakespearean comedy, your topics could include the function of Viola's disguise in *The Twelfth Night* or Portia's disguise in *The Merchant of Venice*. Continue to research your topic to make it more focused.

- <u>Establish</u> your **position/opinion/claim**. Identify whether you are writing an **expository, analytical, or persuasive** thesis statement. This will influence what position you take. For example, if I chose to write about Portia's disguise in *The Merchant of Venice,* my claim could be that Portia gains agency by donning her disguise. I would use supporting evidence to try to persuade my reader.

- Collect your **support/evidence**. For academic papers, inform yourself about your topic through reading and research. If you are writing a scholarship essay or statement of purpose, brainstorm about your qualifications.

Steps 3 and 4 are interchangeable. You might not know what your **position/opinion/claim** is until you have conducted your research. Make sure to edit your thesis while writing your paper. It must accurately reflect the information in your body paragraph. You must ensure your thesis functions properly like a **plan** or **promise**.

Here are some questions to ask yourself when composing your thesis:
1. What is my assignment asking me to do?
2. What type of thesis statement should I write?
3. How/Why did (topic) happen?
4. When (topic) happened, what was the outcome?
5. Who is my audience?
6. After researching my topic, is there a problem? Can I propose a solution?
7. What are the implications or ramifications of my research?

Exercise 3: Thesis Checklist

Use the following checklist when composing your thesis statement:

❒ Does it address the prompt?

❒ Does it focus on one topic?

❒ Does it take a position, state an opinion, or make a claim?

❒ Does it include supporting evidence?

❒ Is it arguable?

❒ Is it specific?

❒ Does it make a promise or a plan for what will be discussed further?

Answer Key

Exercise 1: Identifying the Parts of a Thesis Statement

<u>Example 1:</u>

Topic: A position at the Jedi Academy.

Position: I am an ideal candidate for the Jedi Academy.

Subordinate clause: Despite.

Support: I am able to maintain inner-peace during stressful and/or maddening experiences. I have had extensive training with a lightsaber, and I can move boulder-sized objects using the force.

<u>Example 2:</u>
Topic: Roald Dahl's *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*

Position: it is actually a critique of the rising tide of consumer culture.

Subordinate clause: Although.

Support: the plights of Augustus Gloop, Veruca Salt, Violet Beauregarde, and Mike Teavee warn against the hazards of a culture that encourages instant gratification.

Exercise 2: Determining the Different Types of Thesis Statements

<u>Example 1:</u> Analytical thesis statement. This thesis states that it will *examine* elements of James Weldon Johnson and Ralph Ellison's writing and *establish* a relationship between the two.

<u>Example 2:</u> Expository thesis statement. This thesis *presents* an idea that is supported by evidence. However, it is not deeply *analytical* nor is it trying to *persuade* you to agree with the thesis.

<u>Example 3:</u> Persuasive thesis statement. This thesis begins with evidence that it then uses to *present* an argument. However, unlike the Expository and Analytical thesis, the Persuasive thesis creates a relationship between the evidence and the argument. The relationship between the evidence and the argument exists to *convince* the reader.

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