

Creating a Thesis Statement

What is a thesis statement?

In academic writing, a thesis statement is a sentence that expresses an essay's main idea. It is phrased as a declarative statement, not as a question, and it usually appears near the end of the essay's introduction. An essay's thesis statement serves the same purpose as a paragraph's topic sentence; just as a topic sentence states a paragraph's controlling idea, a thesis statement does the same for an essay, just on a larger scale.

The main functions of a thesis statement are to:

- Make a claim that is supported by evidence
- Unify a paper by showing how different topics are related to convey a specific point
- Forecast the content of the essay
- Create a basis for the outline and structure of the essay

Why is a thesis statement useful?

A thesis statement is useful to both the essay's author and audience. For the author, composing a thesis statement helps to clarify a group of thoughts into one main point, giving a specific focus and direction to his or her writing. This also helps to keep information from straying off topic or becoming too broad or narrow for the scope of the essay. In addition, a thesis statement provides readers with an idea of what information to expect in the body of the essay and also expresses the author's purpose in conveying that information, whether to inform, persuade, or otherwise.

How to develop a working thesis statement

Before composing a final thesis statement, it is necessary to develop what is known as a "working thesis." A working thesis is simply a thesis that is still under construction and will usually undergo some revision before it makes it to the final draft of an essay. It helps to brainstorm topics and create a basic outline or rough draft of the essay before trying to create a working thesis. Once the author has chosen a topic and has narrowed it down to a series of subtopics, he or she can begin thinking about how those subtopics relate to one another. This will help the writer clarify his or her thesis.

For example, assume that an instructor gives an assignment that asks students to analyze the differences between college and high school. After brainstorming, a student may come up with a list of points that looks something like this:

- *College classes are more difficult than high school classes*
- *High school is mandatory but college isn't*
- *College requires more personal responsibility than high school*

- *College is more expensive than high school.*

After reviewing those points, the student may decide on this main idea to tie them all together:

College requires a much higher level of commitment from students than high school.

Although this working thesis is a good start, it is weak because it is not specific enough. However, it can be made stronger by describing the specific areas where college requires more commitment, as illustrated in the example below:

College requires much higher levels of mental, physical, and financial commitment from students than high school.

This is a better working thesis because it addresses the three main points of commitment that make college more challenging than high school. Each point will then become a subsequent topic sentence of the essay's body paragraphs, setting up the structure for the overall essay.

How to refine a working thesis

After the rough draft of the essay has been written using a working thesis statement, the author will often find that there are additional points or insights that he or she would like to make. Or, the author may discover that he or she has too many or too few points to satisfy the essay's page requirements. If so, it is important to constantly reference the working thesis to make sure that whatever new information is incorporated still relates to the overall main idea. If the writer discovers that points begin to stray off-topic, it is a good idea to reevaluate the thesis statement and do one of two things: either revise the thesis to more accurately preface the essay content, or edit the essay content to stay on topic with the thesis.

In the example given, as the student writes his or her essay about the added challenges of college as compared to high school, he or she may also start to acknowledge the advantages as well. For instance, the student may want to point out that college degrees are more valuable to employers than high school diplomas, and in college there are more opportunities to network with other students within the same major. After writing another paragraph that explores those benefits, the thesis statement will have to be revised to address that new topic point, as illustrated in the example below:

Even though college requires much higher levels of mental, physical, and financial commitment from students than high school, it also has additional benefits.

How to tell if a thesis is strong

As the essay continues to be revised and edited, a good way to tell if it has a strong thesis is to make sure it meets the criteria outlined in following checklist.

A strong thesis should:

- ✓ Be written as a statement, not a question
- ✓ Answer the question implicitly posed by your assignment (e.g. “*What are some differences between college and high school, and what significance do they have?*”)
- ✓ Take a firm position that does not begin with the words “I think,” or “I believe”
- ✓ Be focused on one central idea
- ✓ Utilize effective grammar and word choice
- ✓ Reference main topic points
- ✓ Be a succinct expression of a main idea, not a lengthy summary

The working thesis statement used as an example appears to meet most of the criteria listed above, but it still needs to be tweaked to better address the assignment, which is to analyze the differences between high school and college.

Current thesis: *Even though college requires much higher levels of mental, physical, and financial commitment from students than high school, it also has additional benefits.*

If the assignment had been to merely describe differences between high school and college, this thesis would have been great. However, analyzing a topic requires a higher level of critical thinking than simply describing or listing points. In addition to listing the “whats,” of this topic, the thesis should also portray a relationship that examines the “whys.”

The current thesis statement makes a point of noting that even though college presents more challenges than high school, it also comes with more rewards. By analyzing the relationship between those challenges and rewards, a connection can be drawn that little in life worth having comes without hard work, and often the more time and energy invested in a project, the better the results. Based on that analysis, this thesis can be further refined to make the following statement:

Final thesis statement: *Even though college requires much higher levels of mental, physical, and financial commitment from students than high school, the additional benefits make the challenges well worth it.*

Once the final thesis statement has been developed, the essay should be proofread to ensure that its content has been developed sufficiently. Often, an essay’s concluding paragraph will reference the main idea presented in the thesis statement; therefore, it is especially important to revise the conclusion appropriately after making any final changes to the thesis.