
SO WHAT?

HOW TO WRITE WITH A THESIS

Even when you write for yourself, you almost always have a purpose. You write a diary, for instance, to record your thoughts, feelings, and experiences. If you keep a diary and you were to look back at it many years from now, you might find it difficult to understand why you wrote certain things, unless of course you explained the significance of what you were writing. When you write for someone other than yourself, the importance of stating your point clearly and succinctly becomes fundamental. Your readers do not have access to your brain; they only know what you tell them in writing. And they won't be pleased if you ask them to read something that has no apparent point. **FOR THIS REASON, EVERY PAPER THAT YOU WRITE AS A STUDENT, EVERY LETTER TO THE EDITOR THAT WRITE AS A CITIZEN, AND EVERY REPORT THAT YOU WRITE AS AN EMPLOYEE SHOULD MAKE, SOMEWHERE NEAR THE BEGINNING, A CLEAR STATEMENT OF ITS MAIN POINT, OR THESIS.**

A paper without a thesis is a mere grocery list: a little of this, a little of that. A thesis-less paper may convey some interesting information, but it will fail to express the importance of the information or to assemble it into a meaningful whole. Generally, you write because you have done some thinking and you want to communicate the results of your thinking to your audience. Your thesis statement, then, is your chance to show that you have figured something out: it reveals your analysis or interpretation of the materials at hand.

Your thesis statement does not simply state the topic of your essay: a good thesis statement actually presents an argument, which you will support with evidence. Not every thesis that you devise will stun your readers with its profundity, but it must at least present a position that your essay (or letter or report) defends. You can ask two questions of a thesis statement to make sure that it is argumentative. First, could somebody disagree with it? Second, does it require evidence to prove it? If a statement meets these criteria, it's probably a workable thesis.

Readers will be frustrated if your writing reads like a mystery novel, but your thesis statement will not usually be the first sentence of your essay. The thesis statement should usually come at the end of the introduction, which in a short piece of writing is no longer than a paragraph. The sentences that precede the thesis help ease the reader into the paper, providing background information and setting the context for your argument. Then the thesis statement launches the readers into the argument. When you place your statement of argument in this conspicuous place, your readers will recognize your main point right away.

How do you come up with a thesis? You may already have some insight into the topic at hand. If not, you need to **DEVELOP A QUESTION** that will lead you to an interpretation. Some assignments already ask such a question. If that's the case, be sure that your thesis statement does not merely turn the question into a bland statement. When you try to formulate a question of your own, you will quickly discover that some questions work better than others and some don't work at all. A question that you can answer easily—such as, when did the United States

officially enter World War I?—isn't likely to lead to an interpretation. For short writing assignments, you'll also find that you won't be able to answer broad questions, such as: what caused World War I? To write a good essay, you need something in between. Think about the sources that you have available to create an interpretation. Let's assume that you've read President Woodrow Wilson's 1917 "War Message," in which he asked Congress to declare war. You might ask something like this: How did Wilson try to persuade the country to enter the war? This question works well because: 1) it's focused enough to be manageable; 2) you have the source that you need to answer it; 3) answering it will require interpretation.

Having settled on a question to answer, you are ready to GATHER EVIDENCE. For a focused essay, this process may be as simple as reading one or two primary sources and identifying the passages that will help you answer the question. For a more synthetic essay (e.g., for an essay exam), you will need to cull material from a wider variety of sources. In both cases, you will often be able to gather more evidence than you need to support your point. It is worth the trouble to gather extra evidence, however, because you then have the luxury of choosing the evidence that works best.

As you search the sources for evidence, you should begin to work out an answer to your question. Once you have some inkling of the answer, it becomes a hypothesis that you can then test and refine. Avoid fully committing yourself to a position until you have considered all of the available evidence. You may find some evidence that forces you to rethink your argument or even to change your mind completely. To construct a persuasive essay, you need to account for evidence that might seem to weaken your argument, so you should pay careful attention to relevant material that does not support your thesis. Often, the process of confronting anomalous evidence will lead you to a more sophisticated or subtle thesis.

The fact that the thesis statement comes near the beginning of the finished essay does not mean that you have to write the thesis statement before you can begin drafting. Some writers can do this; many writers who try to do it produce an essay that doesn't state the main point clearly until the conclusion. You can avoid this mistake if you USE DRAFTING AS AN EXPLORATORY PROCESS. You need to have some idea of your main point before you start drafting, but the writing process can allow you to refine your idea, to increase its specificity, sophistication, and clarity.

When you begin drafting, then, don't spend too much time fretting over the exact wording of the introduction and thesis statement. Instead, GET STARTED BY ORGANIZING AND ANALYZING YOUR EVIDENCE, one idea and one paragraph at a time. Having pieced everything together, you will have a much better sense of your overall argument; you will be more prepared to write a clear and specific thesis statement. After you articulate the thesis, you will need to bring the rest of the essay into line with it. That's why it is crucial to plan on writing multiple drafts. Revising is about more than proofreading; it's about making sure that all of the parts of the essay work together to convey your main point.

Whatever your writing process, you should always be sure that the thesis statement of your final draft expresses your main point as clearly as possible. Often, the conclusion of an early draft reflects the main point better than the original thesis statement. If you find this characteristic in your writing, consider using the insight of the conclusion to rewrite the introduction and thesis

statement. Then, write a new conclusion that moves beyond summarizing the main point.

Although a thesis statement should be very specific, it cannot convey everything that you want to say. It will introduce neither your evidence nor the many pieces of your argument. Instead, it will concisely state your understanding of the issue at hand. For example: “Despite his strong admiration for the historical figure of Jesus, Thomas Jefferson was a deist— not a Christian.” This thesis is an argumentative assertion, and a paper would need evidence to prove it. Your readers will not need you to say, “My argument is . . .,” but if you can add that phrase to the beginning of your thesis statement, you are probably on the right track.

Stating the thesis is only the beginning of the process of writing an essay. Your thesis statement is a promise to the reader. Be sure that you keep that promise by providing ample evidence for your argument. If you can learn this skill, it will serve you well in our society, which needs people capable of making sense of an overwhelming flood of unorganized information.



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