

Writing a Thesis

WHAT IS ATHESIS?

A thesis is an important part of any essay, expository or argumentative, because it introduces a pattern of development for the rest of your paper to follow. Think of it as a string of pearls; each pearl represents an idea within your paper, and all of the pearls have a common string running through them. That string is your thesis.

An effective thesis

- communicates your main idea in a clear, concise manner;
- is more than just a general statement, fact, or question;
- answers why or how questions related to the chosen topic;
- is carefully worded to avoid confusion;
- presents your essay's direction and scope; and
- creates a reason for your reader to keep reading.

Note: different disciplines have different requirements of what constitutes an appropriate thesis. You should always consult your professor before beginning any writing assignment.

Working Theses

While the term “thesis” may imply finality, your thesis may begin as a “working thesis” before you achieve your final focus. In many disciplines, it is helpful to research your topic and become fully immersed in it before deciding upon a direction for your paper.

Your thesis can always be reworked as you delve further into writing your paper. Think of your “working thesis” in the same way you would the rough draft of your paper. As you write your essay, you may find that your thesis is either too general or too specific; at this point, it may be necessary to tweak your thesis to accurately reflect what you have discussed in the paper. Through this process, you will be able to identify what your paper still needs to say and what information within your paper is not necessary.

Thesis Location

The location of your thesis depends upon the length of your paper; for example, a three-page paper may include the thesis in the introduction paragraph whereas a ten-page paper may state the thesis a few paragraphs later. Most times, writers place their theses near the beginning of the paper to provide their readers with a clear sense of what the paper is about. The location of your thesis is important because it introduces a sense of structure for your paper and serves as a roadmap for you to follow. You should refer back to the thesis as you write your paper to maintain focus.

Argumentative Theses

While theses are found in different kinds of writing, you will most often use theses when writing argumentative essays. In an argumentative paper, your goal is to argue one perspective of an issue. Your thesis, therefore, must concisely state this argument. Since the purpose of this kind of paper is not to explain or present, your thesis must be debatable. If people cannot possibly disagree with your thesis, then it is not suitable for an argumentative paper. A strong thesis should not simply announce the topic, but it should announce your position on the topic as well. However, your thesis is not merely an opinion; you must make a solid claim that can be supported with specific evidence throughout your entire paper.

A weak argumentative thesis

- doesn't make a specific claim;
- restates a fact; or
- presents a general statement.

A strong argumentative thesis

- makes a specific claim;
- controls the argument; and
- provides structure for the argument.

The following are some examples of weak and strong argumentative theses:

WEAK: *Does a teacher's use of humor in the classroom positively impact learning?*

Notice how the thesis is phrased as a question and does not assert an argument. This is an example of a weak thesis because it does not make a specific claim.

STRONGER: *A teacher's uses of humor positively impacts learning by promoting a less formal classroom climate.*

Here, a clear argument is asserted, and structure is provided for the rest of the essay.

A strong thesis also expresses the author's claim using specific language. Sometimes, however, a thesis may be too broad in scope, meaning that it expresses a claim that is too general to be proven within the length of the paper. On the other hand, a thesis may be too narrow, meaning that it does not fully express all elements included in the paper, or it is too specific and, therefore, cannot be supported throughout the paper with sufficient evidence. Your thesis should be right in the middle – not too vague but not too specific either. The following are some examples:

WEAK (too broad): *Some teachers favor certain students over others and treat them differently.*

This statement is too vague. To which “teachers” is the author referring? Which “students” are these “teachers” favoring, and how are they “treating them differently?”

WEAK (too narrow): *Some teachers favor high school athletes and provide them extra credit opportunities that are not available to all students just so they can play in the upcoming game.*

This statement is too narrow. There is not enough material available to support how “some teachers” provide “high school athletes” with “extra credit opportunities” throughout the entire paper. This may work as a specific example included in the body of the paper, but it is too specific to be considered an effective thesis.

STRONGER (in the middle): *Teachers should treat all students equally because favoritism can lead to negative consequences concerning student morale.*

This thesis is broad enough in that it can be supported by many examples; however, it is narrow enough in that it defines the “who” (teachers), the “what” (should treat all students equally), and the “why” (because favoritism can lead to negative consequences concerning student morale).

Helpful Hints

- ⇒ Since your thesis may begin as a “working thesis” before you achieve your final focus, it may appear too broad in scope. If your working thesis expresses your ideas in vague, general language, try to substitute more specific terms for your ideas to achieve the correct balance between being too broad or too narrow.
- ⇒ While you may begin your research with an overall question about the topic you are interested in, it is your job to discuss or possibly answer the question when you write your paper. A question is not an argument, and if a thesis does not express an argument, then it is not a strong thesis.
- ⇒ Remember that you are not handcuffed to your thesis. If while writing the paper, you end up moving in a different direction, you may always alter your thesis later. It is far easier to change a one to two sentence thesis than it is to rework an entire paper. This is why many people may prefer to write their introduction paragraph *after* writing the body paragraphs of their essay.