

Argumentative Topics and Thesis Statements

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WHAT'S COVERED

This tutorial covers argumentative essays — how they're structured, what their thesis statements look like, and what differentiates this mode of writing from other modes — in three parts:

1. Argumentative Topics
2. Introduction to Argumentative Thesis Statements
3. Example Argumentative Thesis Statements

1. Argumentative Topics

When beginning an argument or research paper, writers should choose a topic that interests them and that is sufficiently focused to cover in the time and space allowed for the essay. Writers should also choose topics that are *debatable*. A debatable topic involves an issue about which people can argue, differ in opinion, or disagree.

Topics must be debatable because the priority of academic writing is to participate in a broad, scholarly conversation and contribute to a body of knowledge, neither of which is possible when the question being answered isn't debatable. An easy way to ensure that your question is debatable is to choose a topic on which at least two positions can be taken. Many topics encompass more than two perspectives.

Animal abuse, for example, would be a difficult topic to write an effective research paper about because it is broad. Unless the topic is focused to a more specific area, it won't be possible to identify two clear positions. Compare this broad topic to one that is more specific: animal cruelty in the food industry. With this tighter focus, it's easier to identify positions on the topic. These range from those who believe that eating meat is fine, but funding factory farms is wrong; to those who eat meat and don't care about how it is produced; to vegetarians; and many other positions.

The topics you choose make a big difference, not only in terms of the arguments that can be made and positions that can be taken, but in the types of argumentative research essays that result from them.

Consider the following examples of specific, debatable topics that would be appropriate for an argumentative essay, along with some non-debatable topics.

➦ **EXAMPLE** A debatable topic: whether or not the U.S. government should tax soft drinks containing sugar. Many people disagree on this topic, It has a number of possible sides, pro and con.

Non-debatable topics can only lead to arguments that aren't worth having.

➦ **EXAMPLE** A non-debatable topic: Whether or not soda is a liquid. There's only one position to take on this topic: Yes, soda is a liquid. This isn't a topic about which reasonable people can disagree.



THINK ABOUT IT

What is the difference between the following two topics:

- Are romance novels books?
- Do romance novels create unrealistic expectations about romantic relationships?

The first topic isn't debatable; a rational person can only answer "yes" to this question. However, the second topic might elicit disagreement among people.

Some would probably respond by indicating that they don't believe that romance novels cause harm; readers of romance novels might argue no, they don't create unrealistic expectations; people who worry about the impact of these novels on impressionable readers might argue that they do create false expectations about relationships. Your thesis statement should take a side on a debatable topic; it should not just state a fact.

2. Introduction to Argumentative Thesis Statements

Like other forms of academic writing, argumentative essays must include a clear, focused thesis. An argumentative thesis statement must make a strong claim about a worthwhile debate. The thesis statement is different from the topic, which is broader. The thesis statement requires you to choose a side in the debate initiated by the topic.

To move from the broad topic of an essay to a clear, focused thesis statement, ask questions at the beginning of the writing process when you begin to define your thesis. You can come up with some potential research questions based on your topic. Consider the following example, in which a topic of "global warming" has been selected.

Topic: Global Warming

A good start, but because it is a broad topic it needs to be focused. Which aspect of global warming do you want to write about? You might focus on strategies to combat global warming. Doing so might lead you to a research question like the following:

Research question: What are some of the ways to combat global warming?

Based on that research question, you might develop a working thesis statement like this:

Working Thesis: Humans can reduce global warming by making choices that benefit the environment.

Once you've drafted a working thesis statement, ask yourself questions about it to make sure that it works for an argumentative essay and fulfills your intended purpose:

- "What is the intended effect of this thesis?"

Do you want readers to take action? Do you want them to understand something? Are you trying to convince them of something? Does your thesis reflect your intent?

- "What is the scope of this thesis?"

Make sure that the topic and thesis you've chosen are broad enough to write an essay about, but not too big for your essay (e.g., a topic that might require book-length consideration). Also be sure that the topic is not too small for your essay. A topic that is too focused can limit the amount of available research that supports your argument.

- "Have I taken a clear position on one side of a debatable topic?"

Your answer should be "yes." If you have not chosen a side on a debatable topic, you must revise your working thesis statement.

Once you've brainstormed and drafted a working thesis, use it to guide your research, outlining, and drafting processes. Feel free to adjust your thesis as needed. Doing so is not a sign of a faulty thesis, but of your evolving ideas and opinions about the subject. It's a sign that you're learning as you work: that's a good thing.

3. Example Argumentative Thesis Statements

In an argumentative essay, the thesis statement makes the central argument that is supported by the rest of the essay.



TRY IT

Here are three thesis statements. Which are argumentative and which aren't? Read them and decide.

Mangoes are a fruit common to the Asian subcontinent but beloved worldwide.

The international treaties governing mango import and export have wide-ranging effects on the mango industry.

International treaties governing mango import and export should be improved to allow for greater access to mangos in the USA.

This thesis statement is not argumentative:

Mangoes are a fruit common to the Asian subcontinent but beloved worldwide.

Notice that this thesis statement makes a statement of fact. This claim is either true or false; it is not debatable. This thesis would be better for an informative essay.

The second thesis, though it involves a topic that's more controversial, is also not argumentative:

The international treaties governing mango import and export have wide-ranging effects on the mango industry.

Is this claim debatable or simply true? It's hard to imagine that anyone would disagree with this statement. International treaties certainly affect the industries they govern. That's what they're designed to do. This thesis is better suited for an informative essay that would explain what these treaties are and how they function.

The last one is an argumentative thesis statement:

International treaties governing mango import and export should be improved to allow for greater access to mangos in the USA.

Notice the use of the word "should." That's a clue. It tells you that this is advocating for action to be taken — someone should do something. You immediately know that this is an argumentative claim because you might argue that readers should do what it says, while someone else might disagree.

Readers can agree or disagree with this claim, and can argue for either position. All of this indicates that this is an argumentative thesis statement.

Consider the following short essay that lacks a thesis statement:

Mass campaigns against smoking have reduced the numbers of smokers in the USA drastically. Yet some still smoke, leading many to wonder how to further reduce these numbers.

Smoking harms our health and well-being. Smoking directly damages lungs and tissues, and negatively affects the psyche through powerful addiction. And secondhand smoke can be just as dangerous. Smoking is thus dangerous for all.

Strict regulations have reduced the amount of smokers in this country. Cigarette taxes make the cost of cigarettes prohibitively high. Though the efficacy of such policies is debatable, to further incentivize quitting, cigarette taxes should be increased.

Beyond simply reducing smokers, increased taxes can be used on research, education, and outreach. This can fund programs curing cancer and campaigns teaching youth about the dangers of tobacco. These programs can be very beneficial.



TRY IT

Here are two potential thesis statements that you can use to fill in the blank. Read them and decide which one is more effective for an argumentative essay.

Mass campaigns against smoking have reduced the numbers of smokers in the USA drastically. Yet some still smoke, leading many to wonder how to further reduce these numbers.

Many people debate the merits of increasing the cigarette tax.
Increasing cigarette taxes will benefit smokers and non-smokers alike.

Smoking harms our health and well-being. Smoking directly damages lungs and tissues, and negatively affects the psyche through powerful addiction. And secondhand smoke can be just as dangerous. Smoking is thus dangerous for all.

Strict regulations have reduced the amount of smokers in this country. Cigarette taxes make the cost of cigarettes prohibitively high. Though the efficacy of such policies is debatable, to further incentivize quitting, cigarette taxes should be increased.

Beyond simply reducing smokers, increased taxes can be used on research, education, and outreach. This can fund programs curing cancer and campaigns teaching youth about the dangers of tobacco. These programs can be very beneficial.

This thesis statement introduces the topic that is discussed in the essay:

Mass campaigns against smoking have reduced the numbers of smokers in the USA drastically. Yet some still smoke, leading many to wonder how to further reduce these numbers.

Many people debate the merits of increasing the cigarette tax.
Increasing cigarette taxes will benefit smokers and non-smokers alike.

Smoking harms our health and well-being. Smoking directly damages lungs and tissues, and negatively affects the psyche through powerful addiction. And secondhand smoke can be just as dangerous. Smoking is thus dangerous for all.

Strict regulations have reduced the amount of smokers in this country. Cigarette taxes make the cost of cigarettes prohibitively high. Though the efficacy of such policies is debatable, to further incentivize quitting, cigarette taxes should be increased.

Beyond simply reducing smokers, increased taxes can be used on research, education, and outreach. This can fund programs curing cancer and campaigns teaching youth about the dangers of tobacco. These programs can be very beneficial.

This statement indicates that there is a debate, but does it make an argument about that debate or take a side? No, it does not. It's not argumentative.

The other **thesis statement**, however, takes a side:

Mass campaigns against smoking have reduced the numbers of smokers in the USA drastically. Yet some still smoke, leading many to wonder how to further reduce these numbers.

Many people debate the merits of increasing the cigarette tax.
Increasing cigarette taxes will benefit smokers and non-smokers alike.

Smoking harms our health and well-being. Smoking directly damages lungs and tissues, and negatively affects the psyche through powerful addiction. And secondhand smoke can be just as dangerous. Smoking is thus dangerous for all.

Strict regulations have reduced the amount of smokers in this country. Cigarette taxes make the cost of cigarettes prohibitively high. Though the efficacy of such policies is debatable, to further incentivize quitting, cigarette taxes should be increased.

Beyond simply reducing smokers, increased taxes can be used on research, education, and outreach. This can fund programs curing cancer and campaigns teaching youth about the dangers of tobacco. These programs can be very beneficial.

This statement stays on the topic, presents the debate, and then makes an argumentative claim that it wants readers to accept.



TERM TO KNOW

Thesis Statement

Takes a clear position on a debatable question and backs up claims with evidence and reasoning



SUMMARY

This tutorial examined what makes a good argumentative topic, and how to start with a topic to develop a working thesis statement. **Argumentative thesis statements** are one of the most important components of argumentative essays because they make a strong claim about a worthwhile debate. A successful argumentative thesis statement presents an argument to readers in a clear and compelling way.



TERMS TO KNOW

Argument

Takes a clear position on a debatable question and backs up claims with evidence and reasoning.

Thesis Statement

A single sentence that expresses the controlling idea for a piece of writing.