

# Developing a Working Thesis

by Sophia



## WHAT'S COVERED

This tutorial covers thesis statements and introductions—some details on how they work and how they're connected, and the purpose and components of a thesis statement. The specific areas of focus include:

1. Essay Development
2. Thesis Statements
  - 2a. Successful Thesis Statements
3. Introductions

## 1. Essay Development

Before going more in depth about thesis statements and introductions, it's important to think about essay development overall. Essay development simply means the process of developing or composing the ideas that are going to govern your essay.

This requires you to build support, such as facts and examples, for the main idea. Thus as you write, you should be referring back to the outline of your essay to make sure that those supporting details match the plan you made for the progression of the essay.

It might feel a little daunting to think that you have to generate a whole essay, but the secret is that if you can write a successful paragraph, you can write a whole paper. This is because the structure of a paper mirrors the structure of a paragraph.

Just as in a paragraph, the topic sentence focuses and announces the main point of the paragraph, so too does the thesis statement focus, announce, and structure the whole paper.

Likewise, in a paragraph, supporting sentences provide details, evidence, and examples to prove that the main point of the paragraph is believable. The supporting paragraphs of an essay parallel this role, providing supporting details for the whole thesis statement.



The same writing skills you've been mastering all along are still at work in these essay development tasks.

## 2. Thesis Statements

First of all, remember that a **thesis statement** is not a topic. The topic can be broad and overarching, like an umbrella, whereas the thesis statement is specific and focused. It's an articulation of your main point only.

A topic might have multiple thesis statements that come out of it and that demonstrates how broad it is in contrast to your narrow, focused thesis. Therefore, a thesis statement can be defined as a single sentence that expresses the controlling idea for a piece of writing, and it usually comes in the first paragraph or so.

To get to that single focused statement, you might go through multiple drafts. You might even find that your thesis statement changes as you write the essay. That means that it's totally okay to have a **working thesis statement**, which is a thesis statement that a writer uses in the service of creating a first draft. The working thesis may be rewritten as the essay evolves.

You always want to start writing with a strong draft thesis to make sure that your writing stays focused around the purpose of the essay; however, as you write, the working thesis might require some revision and rethinking, especially if you find that you need to think through ideas that you hadn't originally considered as part of the plan.

You may do research and discover that the facts don't match your original assumption, and so you need to change your thesis to match the data. Or you might write your way into a new opinion or position on the issues.

All of those are great reasons to revise your working thesis statement. You can reassess and revise at any stage in the writing process because again, writing is a process, not a product. It's recursive, so you'll go back over and through your thinking many times as you write.

### IN CONTEXT

This is really similar to a scientist's journey through the scientific method. When scientists are working through a problem, they start with a hypothesis, which is basically a working thesis. Then as they experiment, if their findings contradict or alter their original hypothesis, they let those findings alter their thesis. Treat yourself like a scientist of writing and do the same with your thesis statements.



### TERMS TO KNOW

#### Thesis Statement

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

#### Working Thesis Statement

A thesis statement that a writer uses in the service of creating a first draft; may be rewritten as the essay evolves.

## 2a. Successful Thesis Statements

Building successful, effective thesis statements is important because the thesis statement sets up the reader's expectations about the purpose and content of the essay, signaling what the main points are going to be.

Therefore, you need to express your main idea in a clear and interesting manner by:

- Using the thesis as a signpost, letting the reader know what direction the writer is going to take in a text
- Being precise, concise, and specific
- Using the thesis to mirror the purpose, such as an argumentative thesis that takes a side in a debate for an argumentative essay
- Making just one single clear assertion about your take on the topic



TRY IT

Take a moment to read the following short essay, and see if you can identify where and what the thesis statement is.

*Maybe you roast a turkey or maybe you make empanadas. Maybe you hang mistletoe or maybe you set up a menorah. However you celebrate the holidays, our traditions help connect us to our families and our heritage.*

*There are many different ways to celebrate every holiday. Some traditions are shared between large groups of people, such as fireworks on the Fourth of July in the USA. Others are individual, such as a family that always serves apple pie instead of cake for birthdays. Some traditions are historically significant, such as the Christmas tree, while others are more recent. Regardless, they are all significant to those who practice them.*

*These traditions are significant because they connect the person practicing them to their origins. In some cases, that connection will be to a long history of cultural heritage. In other cases, that connection will be simply to a family member or friend. Both connections, however, are important for people.*

*Making connections is important because it helps people feel related to something bigger than themselves. It offers each person a place in a huge group of people.*

*Whatever the tradition is, practicing it can help people feel connected to the past and to what truly matters in life.*

See how the thesis comes at the end of the introduction?

*Maybe you roast a turkey or maybe you make empanadas. Maybe you hang mistletoe or maybe you set up a menorah. However you celebrate the holidays, our traditions help connect us to our families and our heritage.*

*There are many different ways to celebrate every holiday. Some traditions are shared between large groups of people, such as fireworks on the Fourth of July in the USA. Others are individual, such as a family that always serves apple pie instead of cake for birthdays. Some traditions are historically significant, such as the Christmas tree, while others are more recent. Regardless, they are all significant to those who practice them.*

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The thesis relates to the essay's content by specifically mentioning traditions, connection, family, and heritage. You see those concepts taken up again in more detail in the body paragraphs.

*Maybe you roast a turkey or maybe you make empanadas. Maybe you hang mistletoe or maybe you set up a menorah. However you celebrate the holidays, our traditions help connect us to our families and our heritage.*

*There are many different ways to celebrate every holiday. Some traditions are shared between large groups of people, such as fireworks on the Fourth of July in the USA. Others are individual, such as a family that always serves apple pie instead of cake for birthdays. Some traditions are historically significant, such as the Christmas tree, while others are more recent. Regardless, they are all significant to those who practice them.*

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*Making connections is important because it helps people feel related to something bigger than themselves. It offers each person a place in a huge group of people.*

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You're also probably interested in seeing where this goes. If you have your own traditions that matter to you, you might be engaged and connected to the specific discussion here. Overall, this is a strong thesis because it expresses the main point of this short essay in a compelling, concise manner.

Now consider if the writer changed the thesis statement like this:

*Maybe you roast a turkey or maybe you make empanadas. Maybe you hang mistletoe or maybe you set up a menorah. Most holidays have associated traditions.*

*There are many different ways to celebrate every holiday. Some traditions are shared between large groups of people, such as fireworks on the Fourth of July in the USA. Others are individual, such as a family that always serves apple pie instead of cake for birthdays. Some traditions are historically significant, such as the Christmas tree, while others are more recent. Regardless, they are all significant to those who practice them.*

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It's based on the same topic, but does it indicate to you, the reader, what the main point is going to be in any kind of detail? And do you care about this statement? You probably don't because it's pretty vague and doesn't really set up specific, direct exploration of one interesting aspect of this topic.

What about this thesis?

*Maybe you roast a turkey or maybe you make empanadas. Maybe you hang mistletoe or maybe you set up a menorah. Holidays can lead to familial conflict between traditionalists who want things to stay the same and evolutionists who want to allow tradition to evolve.*

*There are many different ways to celebrate every holiday. Some traditions are shared between large groups of people, such as fireworks on the Fourth of July in the USA. Others are individual, such as a family that always serves apple pie instead of cake for birthdays. Some traditions are historically significant, such as the Christmas tree, while others are more recent. Regardless, they are all significant to those who practice them.*

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*Whatever the tradition is, practicing it can help people feel connected to the past and to what truly matters in life.*

Again, this is the same topic, but is this really the specific subject of the essay? Does this point to where the essay actually goes? No. The essay doesn't discuss the difference between traditionalists and evolutionists. This thesis statement needs some revision to match the direction the essay took.

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## 3. Introductions

It's also important to think about where the thesis statement fits—the **introduction**. Since this is the piece of writing that your readers will experience first, you want it to make a good impression by being clear, articulate, fully thought out, and connected to the reader.

Every introduction should give both a brief explanation of the topic and a clear statement of the thesis, but a really good introduction will draw the readers in and capture their attention. This is called the hook because it keeps the reader on the line, wanting to learn more.

You can hook your readers in a lot of ways, some of which are:

- Offering a narrative of an interesting situation or experience

- Providing a quotation that grabs the reader's attention
  - If you choose to do this, try to avoid quotations that people hear all the time, as they won't be interesting or new. Instead, go for a surprising or compelling piece of information, a statistic, or someone's idea.
- Comparing two dissimilar things through a compelling analogy to form new connections in the minds of your readers
- Giving a definition of a term that's central to your essay
  - If you choose to do this, avoid dry dictionary definitions, as these can be pretty boring and don't always help build new connections or ideas for your reader. Instead, use definitions to make more connections, explaining an interesting facet of the definition, or previewing some debate over the terms or concepts of your essay.

For instance, what if the introduction to the previous essay sample said:

*Traditions are often thought of as just mindless conventions; however, others have pointed out that the word tradition means the transmission of culture between generations. Thus, tradition is about building connection, not mindlessly repeating the past.*

See how this opens with a debate about the significance of tradition that uses the definition to point towards the thesis? This is an example of effectively chosen definitions.

Here is an introduction that uses the narrative hook:

*Every New Year's Eve, I serve my grandmother's special champagne punch. The recipe comes from her grandmother, and generations of women in my family have served it. Drinking it, I always feel like I'm back in her kitchen, watching her mix together the shining drink in her big punch bowl.*

And here is one that uses an analogy:

*Traditions are a little like photographs. They capture a moment in time and transport you there whenever you perform them. In this way, traditions are reminders of our history and connections to our past.*

As you see, each of these introductions pulls the reader in and encourages him or her to read further by making a connection between the reader and the author.



#### TERM TO KNOW

##### Introduction

The beginning of an essay or other writing project; the first paragraph or two of an essay.



#### SUMMARY

In this tutorial, you learned that **essay development** is the process of developing or composing the ideas that are going to govern your essay. A key component of this process is the **thesis statement**, which is the single sentence that expresses the controlling idea for your essay. An important criterion for **successful thesis statements** is to express your ideas in a clear and interesting manner.

Finally, you learned about essay **introductions**, which are the beginning of a piece of writing, and where the thesis statement resides. There are many ways to write a good introduction, but it's always important that you hook the reader by opening in a way that will make him or her invested in what you have to say.

Good luck!

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