

Formulating a Thesis

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WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, you will learn about the role and importance of appropriate topics and thesis statements for persuasive argumentative essays. You will also discover how formulating a thesis builds your problem solving skill. Specifically, this lesson will cover:

1. What Is a Thesis?

A **thesis** is a single sentence that expresses the core idea driving a writing project's goals and structure. Theses most often appear near the beginning of an essay.

In short essays, the thesis is usually placed in the first paragraph, but this isn't always the case. It's common practice to position the core idea near the start of the essay, and then use the rest of the essay to explain it, and to provide the sub-claims and evidence that support it.

It's also common for a thesis to change during the writing process, most often during the research and drafting stages. This is normal, and it often indicates that the writer has done some critical thinking about her work.

If a writer's thoughts and opinions don't change during the writing process, she may not have learned much (or anything) as a result of it. However, the eventual production of a solid draft of the thesis is important, because it anchors the writing process and ensures that the project is on track.



HINT

It's important to understand the difference between a thesis and a topic. Topics are broader than thesis statements—a single topic can contain several thesis statements.



TERM TO KNOW

Thesis

A single sentence that expresses the controlling idea of a written work.

2. Qualities of a Good Thesis

What's the difference between a good thesis and one that needs more work? A good thesis presents a topic that makes readers want to keep reading.

The best way to write a good thesis is to begin by making sure that your topic interests you. No matter the topic, it's likely that there's something about it—some thesis within it—that interests you and your potential readers.

A thesis must also be compelling. It must make readers want to understand more about your argument, either by involving them in it or by making its claim in such a way as to encourage them to keep reading.

A thesis, especially one that is presented at or near the beginning of an essay, should act as a road sign, signaling readers about what's ahead. Readers should not be surprised by the reasoning and evidence you use to support your essay's central claim.

A solid claim also differentiates a strong thesis statement from an inferior one. Your claim should be specific and clear. Even complex ideas can be stated as thesis statements when they reflect a strong grasp of the subject matter and efficient use of language. By clearly articulating your topic, you demonstrate a strong understanding of the issue which is essential for effective **problem solving skills.**

3. Thesis Questions

A thesis can also be thought of as an answer to a question that's worth asking. A thesis question drives the composition of an argument. Open-ended questions are often most effective because they help you to generate, revise, and focus your thesis as you write.

Thesis questions can take a number of forms:

- Questions of fact
- Questions of preference
- Questions of definition
- Questions of interpretation
- Questions of policy

| Thesis Question | Description | Example |
|-----------------------------|---|---|
| Questions of fact | Questions of fact commonly include those that challenge the truth of a currently-held belief. | “Though William Shakespeare is known worldwide as a famous playwright, a close study of the life of Christopher Marlowe may challenge Shakespeare’s title.” |
| Questions of Preference | Questions of preference are driving questions that ask whether something is preferable to something else. | “A plant-based diet is a healthier and more sustainable diet than one that follows a keto or paleo outline.” |
| Questions of definition | Questions of definition generally address the meaning of words or concepts. | “Homesteading, a lifestyle of self-sufficiency characterized by agriculture, has seen an increased popularity in the last decade.” |
| Questions of interpretation | Questions of interpretation are one of the most common types of thesis questions in academic writing. These questions ask | “At first glance Robert Frost may be advocating for going one’s way in “The Road Not Taken,” but a closer look at the famous poem shows us is he |

| | | |
|---------------------|--|---|
| | how something can be described or analyzed. | really stating that the path we take shouldn't be the focus." |
| Questions of policy | Questions of policy ask what should be done about a social or legal issue. | "The best way to reduce homelessness in the city is not stricter laws on panhandling but to focus our efforts on finding people places to stay and gainful employment." |

Asking and answering thesis questions can help writers before they begin drafting, and can guide and inform their work throughout the writing process.

4. Persuasive Topics

When beginning a persuasive argument or research paper, writers should choose a topic that interests them and that has an appropriate scope for 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 even more than two perspectives.

IN CONTEXT

The environment would be a difficult topic to write an effective research paper about because it is very 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: reducing pollution through alternative energy. With this tighter focus, it's easier to identify positions on the topic. These range from those who believe we should all use solar, to people who only want to have the cheapest form of fuel.

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 persuasive research essays that result from them.

➞ **EXAMPLE** A debatable topic would be whether or not the U.S. government should provide free college education. Many people disagree on this topic, and it has a number of possible sides, both pro and con.

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

➞ **EXAMPLE** A non-debatable topic would be whether or not higher education costs money. There's only one position to take on this topic: Yes, it does. This isn't a topic about which reasonable people can disagree.



THINK ABOUT IT

What is the difference between the following two topics:

- Is there violence in video games?

- Does violence in video games lead to children being desensitized to violence in life?

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 people would probably respond by indicating that they don't believe that the violence is excessive, or that video games are to blame for the actions of people. Others may feel that there should be limits or bans on violence in video games.

Your thesis statement should take a side on a debatable topic; it should not just state a fact.

5. Introduction to Persuasive Thesis Statements

Like other forms of academic writing, persuasive essays must include a clear, focused thesis. A persuasive 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 the topic of "virtual learning" has been selected.

Topic: Virtual learning

This is a good start, but because it is a broad topic, it needs to be focused. Which aspect of virtual learning do you want to write about? You might focus on the benefits of virtual learning for high school students. Doing so might lead you to a research question like the following:

Research question: What are some of the benefits to virtual learning?

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

Working thesis: Flexible schedules and autonomy make virtual learning a beneficial choice for many high school students.

Once you've drafted a working thesis statement, ask yourself questions about it to make sure that it works for a persuasive 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?** 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.

Problem Solving: Apply Your Skill

By researching and answering the questions above, you are digging deeply into your chosen topic. For instance, let's say that you work in a clothing factory and you have an idea for making the manufacturing process more efficient without compromising quality. Some employees may want to take the risk of making a major change, while others may not. In this case, your thesis may be that “restructuring the organization's manufacturing process will increase profits and ease stress among employees.” How would you go through the process and questions from this lesson to more deeply research this thesis statement?

6. Sample Persuasive Thesis Statements

In a persuasive 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 persuasive and which aren't? Read them and decide.

Thesis #1: Virtual learning involves students using a learning management system to take their classes online, without going to a classroom or campus.

Is this thesis statement persuasive?

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The first thesis statement is not persuasive. Notice that it makes a statement of fact; the claim is not debatable. This thesis would be better for an informative essay.

Thesis #2: Public schools should try to help students earn their education.

Is this thesis statement persuasive?

+

The second thesis statement, though it involves a topic that appears more controversial, is also not persuasive. It's hard to imagine that anyone would disagree with this statement, as this is the purpose of education. That's what it's designed to do.

Thesis #3: Public high schools should offer virtual learning to juniors and seniors since the flexible schedule and allowance for autonomy could benefit students and increase graduation rates.

Is this thesis statement persuasive?

+

The third thesis statement is, in fact, persuasive. Notice the use of the word “should” in this thesis. That’s a clue that tells you this thesis is advocating for action to be taken—someone should do something. You immediately know that this is a persuasive claim because you might argue that readers should do what it says, while someone else might disagree.

Now, consider the following short essay that is missing a thesis statement:

It is important for students to have a high school education. Colleges require a diploma before students can enroll for more specialized training or study. The vast majority of jobs require applicants to have a high school education. However, some people still do not finish high school.

In many areas, teen pregnancy is still high. Students who are also parents may struggle to work to support their child as well as go to school, which requires a large number of hours in the day. When forced to choose, many students will opt to drop out and work to take care of their children. Another option could help these students finish their education while still supporting their families.

Some students need to work for other reasons. Some families rely on the teenager’s salary to help pay the bills. Other students may be emancipated and have to pay all of their own bills. In a small, family-run business, the older children may be needed to help run the business, working long hours which makes attending school difficult. A flexible schedule could keep students enrolled instead of dropping out.



Here are two potential thesis statements that you can use to fill in the blank space after the first paragraph. Read them and decide which one is more effective for a persuasive essay:

Thesis #1: Some people suggest that virtual learning could benefit students.

Thesis #2: Schools could increase graduation rates by offering virtual learning to some high school students.

Which thesis statement would be more effective for a persuasive essay?

+

The first thesis statement introduces the topic that is discussed in the essay. It indicates that there is a

debate, but does it make an argument about that debate or take a side? No, it does not. Thus, it's not argumentative.

The second thesis statement, however, takes a side. This statement stays on topic, presents the debate, and then makes a persuasive claim that it wants readers to accept.



SUMMARY

In this lesson, you learned that a **thesis statement** is the controlling idea of a piece of writing, typically expressed in a single sentence toward the beginning of an essay. The **qualities of a good thesis** include an interest to the writer, a compelling argument, an indication of what will be discussed in the essay, and a solid claim that can be backed up with evidence. Sometimes, posing a thesis as an answer to one of the types of **thesis questions** can help a writer to stay on track during the writing process.

Next, you learned what makes a good **persuasive topic**, and how to start with a topic to develop a working thesis statement. You also received an **introduction to persuasive thesis statements**, which must make a strong claim about a worthwhile debate. You explored some **sample persuasive thesis statements** to see how, when successful, they present the argument to readers in a clear and compelling way. Finally, you discovered how writing thesis statements strengthens your **problem solving skill**.

Best of luck in your learning!

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TERMS TO KNOW

Thesis

A single sentence that expresses the controlling idea of a written work.