

# Formulating a Thesis

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## WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, you will learn how to create and revise a strong thesis statement. Specifically, this lesson will cover:

## 1. Elements of a Thesis Statement

For every essay you write, you must focus on a central idea. This idea stems from a topic you have chosen or been assigned. It is not enough to merely discuss a general topic or answer a question with a yes or no. You have to form a specific opinion, and then articulate that into a controlling idea—the main idea upon which you build your **thesis statement**.

The thesis is not the topic itself, but rather your interpretation of the question or subject. For whatever topic you are working with, you must ask yourself, “What do I want to say about this?” Asking and then answering this question is vital to forming a thesis that is precise, forceful, and confident.

A thesis statement is one sentence long and appears toward the end of your essay's introduction. It is specific and focuses on one to three points of a single idea—points that are able to be demonstrated in the body of the essay.

In this way, the thesis forecasts the content of the essay and suggests how you will organize your information. Remember that a thesis statement does not summarize an issue but rather dissects it.



### HINT

You can find thesis statements in many places, such as in the news, in the opinions of friends, coworkers, or teachers, and even in songs you hear on the radio. Become aware of thesis statements in everyday life by paying attention to people's opinions and their reasons for those opinions. Pay attention to your own everyday thesis statements as well, as these can become material for future essays.



### TERM TO KNOW

#### Thesis Statement

The controlling idea of a piece of writing, expressed in a single sentence.

## 2. Strong Thesis Statements



A strong thesis statement contains the following qualities.

**Specificity:** A thesis statement must concentrate on a specific area of a general topic. As you may recall, the creation of a thesis statement begins when you choose a broad subject and then narrow down its parts until you pinpoint a specific aspect of that topic.

➞ **EXAMPLE** Health care is a broad topic, but a proper thesis statement would focus on a specific area of that topic, such as options for individuals without health care coverage.

**Precision:** A strong thesis statement must be precise enough to allow for a coherent argument and to remain focused on the topic.

➞ **EXAMPLE** If the specific topic is options for individuals without health care coverage, then your precise thesis statement must make an exact claim about it, such as that limited options exist for those who are uninsured by their employers. You must further pinpoint what you are going to discuss regarding these limited options, such as whom they affect and what the cause is.

**Ability to be argued:** A thesis statement must present a relevant and specific argument. A factual statement is often not considered arguable. Be sure your thesis statement contains a point of view that can be supported with evidence.

**Ability to be demonstrated:** For any claim you make in your thesis, you must be able to provide reasons and examples for your opinion. You can use some personal observations in order to do this, but you should also consult outside sources to demonstrate that what you assert is valid. A worthy argument is backed by examples and details.

**Forcefulness:** A thesis statement that is forceful shows readers that you are, in fact, making an argument. The tone is assertive and takes a stance that others might oppose.

**Confidence:** In addition to using force in your thesis statement, you must also use confidence in your claim. Phrases such as "I feel" or "I believe" actually weaken the readers' sense of your confidence because these phrases imply that you are the only person who feels the way you do. In other words, your stance has insufficient backing. Taking an authoritative stance on the matter persuades your readers to have faith in your argument and open their minds to what you have to say.

## IN CONTEXT

Each of the following thesis statements meets several of the qualities discussed above:

1. Shakespeare's use of dramatic irony in *Romeo and Juliet* spoils the outcome for the audience and weakens the plot.
2. Holden Caulfield, J. D. Salinger's character in *Catcher in the Rye*, is a confused rebel who voices his disgust with phonies, yet in an effort to protect himself, he acts like a phony on many occasions.
3. Compared to an absolute divorce, no-fault divorce is less expensive, promotes fairer settlements, and reflects a more realistic view of the causes for marital breakdown.
4. Exposing children from an early age to the dangers of drug abuse is a sure method of preventing future drug addiction.



### 3. Weak Thesis Statements

Now that you've looked at the qualities of a good thesis statement and seen some examples, you should also be aware of the pitfalls to avoid when composing your own thesis.

A thesis is weak when it is simply a declaration of your subject or a description of what you will discuss in your essay.

➞ EXAMPLE My paper will explain why imagination is more important than knowledge.

A thesis is weak when it makes an unreasonable or outrageous claim, or insults the opposing side.

➞ EXAMPLE Religious radicals across America are trying to legislate their Puritanical beliefs by banning required high school books.

A thesis is weak when it contains an obvious fact or something that no one can disagree with, or provides a dead end.

➞ EXAMPLE Advertising companies use sex to sell their products.

A thesis is weak when the statement is too broad.

➞ EXAMPLE The life of Abraham Lincoln was long and challenging.

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### 4. Thesis Statement Revision

Your thesis will probably change as you write, so you will need to modify it to reflect exactly what you have discussed in your essay.

This is why your thesis statement begins as a **working thesis statement**, or an indefinite statement that you make about your topic early in the writing process for the purpose of planning and guiding your writing.

Working thesis statements often become stronger as you gather information and form new opinions and reasons for those opinions. Revision helps you strengthen your thesis so that it matches what you have expressed in the body of the paper.

The best way to revise your thesis statement is to ask questions about it and then examine the answers to those questions. By challenging your own ideas and forming definite reasons for those ideas, you grow closer to a more precise point of view, which you can then incorporate into your thesis statement.



#### TERM TO KNOW

##### Working Thesis Statement

An indefinite statement made about a topic early in the writing process for the purpose of planning and guiding the writing.



#### SUMMARY

In this lesson, you learned that the **elements of a thesis statement** include a specific focus and a suggestion for how the essay will be organized. **Strong thesis statements** are specific, precise,



forceful, confident, able to be demonstrated, and able to be argued. Conversely, **weak thesis statements** simply declare the topic of the essay or contain obvious facts that cannot be argued. **Thesis statement revision** involves ensuring that all ideas expressed in the essay are accurately reflected in the thesis.

Best of luck in your learning!

Source: This content and supplemental material has been adapted from Lumen Learning's "Developing a Strong, Clear Thesis Statement" and "Formulating a Thesis" tutorials.



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