

Thesis Statements

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WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, you will learn how thesis statements provide the direction for essays, and how strong thesis statements stand apart from weak ones. Specifically, this lesson will cover:

1. What Is a Thesis Statement?
2. Thesis Statements in Action

1. What Is a Thesis Statement?

A **thesis statement** can be defined as a single sentence that expresses the main point or position of a piece of writing, and it usually comes at the end of the first paragraph of an essay.

It's important to remember that a thesis statement is different from a larger essay **topic**, which is the broad subject of a written work. A topic can be overarching, like an umbrella, whereas a thesis statement is specific and focused.

➞ **EXAMPLE** "Life-changing events" is a broad topic, while "choosing to go to college" is a narrowed-down version of that topic that could be used to form a thesis statement.

The thesis is a statement of your main point only, with several **main ideas** that tie back to that main point and form the body paragraphs in the essay. A topic might have more than one thesis statement that could come out of it, which demonstrates how broad it is in contrast to your narrow, focused thesis.

IN CONTEXT

It can be helpful to think of a thesis in terms of the following formula:

Narrow topic + main ideas = thesis statement

Returning to the broad topic of "life-changing events," here's how that thesis formula might look in practice:

*I have chosen to change my life by attending college (**narrow topic**) in order to increase my knowledge (**first main idea**), advance in my career (**second main idea**), and set an example for my family (**third main idea**).*

To get to a single focused thesis statement, you might go through multiple drafts. You might even find that your thesis statement changes as you write the essay. That means 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 working thesis to make sure that your writing stays focused around the essay's **purpose**, or goal; 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.

➞ **EXAMPLE** 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.

Either 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 repetitive, so you'll go back over and through your thinking many times as you write.



TERMS TO KNOW

Thesis Statement

A single sentence that expresses the main point or position of a piece of writing.

Topic

The broad subject of a written work.

Main Idea

In writing, a point or concept that drives one or more body paragraphs of an essay.

Working Thesis Statement

A thesis statement that a writer uses in the creation of a first draft, and that may be rewritten as the essay evolves.

Purpose

The intended goal or value of a text.

2. Thesis Statements in Action

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 ideas are going to be.

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

- Using the thesis as a signpost to let the reader know what direction the essay is going to take
- Being precise, concise, and specific
- Using the thesis to mirror the purpose, such as a personal essay that explains why the writer made a certain decision
- Making just one clear claim about the topic

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 United States. 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 simply be 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 (underlined) 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.

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 United States. 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 simply be to a family member or friend.** Both connections, however, are important for people.*

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After reading the thesis, you're probably interested in seeing where this essay 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 what would happen 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.

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 a 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 traditions to evolve.

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.



SUMMARY

In this lesson, you learned that a **thesis statement** is a central idea that guides an essay. Developing a strong thesis statement is important because it will help you ensure that your essay stays focused on this main idea. You then looked at **thesis statements in action** by reading a sample essay and exploring how the thesis is reflected throughout the body paragraphs. Good thesis statements are clear and concise, reflect the purpose of the essay, and focus on one key idea about the topic.

Best of luck in your learning!



TERMS TO KNOW

Main Idea

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Purpose

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Topic

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Working Thesis Statement

A thesis statement that a writer uses in the creation of a first draft, and that may be rewritten as the essay evolves.