

USING THESIS STATEMENTS

When you are asked to write an essay that creates an argument, your reader will expect a clear statement of your position. Typically, this summary statement comes in the first paragraph of the essay, though there is no rigid rule about position. Here are some characteristics of good thesis statements, with samples of useful and inadequate ones. Note that the better examples substitute specific argumentative points for sweeping general statements; they indicate a theoretical basis and promise substantial support. (See *Myths About Thesis Statements* [over] for a discussion of times not to organize your writing around thesis statements.)

1. **It makes a definite and limited assertion that needs to be explained and supported by further discussion.**

trite, irrelevant

Shakespeare was the world's greatest playwright.

intriguing

The last scene in *Midsummer Night's Dream* adds a political dimension to the comedy ending by incorporating subtle linguistic and theatrical references to Elizabeth's position as queen.

2. **It shows the emphasis of your argument and indicates its methodology.**

emotional, vague

This essay will show that the North American Free Trade agreement was a disaster for the Canadian furniture industry.

worth attention

Neither neo-protectionism nor post-industrial theory explains the steep reversal of fortune for the Canadian furniture industry in the period 1988-1994. Data on productivity, profits, and employment, however, can be closely correlated with provisions of the North American Free Trade Agreement that took effect in the same period.

3. **It shows awareness of difficulties and disagreements.**

sweeping, vague

Having an official policy on euthanasia just causes problems, as the Dutch example shows.

suitably complex

Dutch laws on euthanasia have been praised for their use of the principle of self-determination. Recent cases, however, show that these laws have not been able to deal adequately with issues involving technological intervention on unconscious patients. Hamarckian theory is needed to enlarge the framework used in creating the Dutch law. It provides one way to examine the key question of how to assign rights.

N.B. See over for a discussion of faulty ideas about thesis statements.

Myths about Thesis Statements and some better ideas

- *Every paper requires one.*

Assignments that ask you to write personal responses or to explore a subject don't want you to prejudge the issues. Essays of literary interpretation often want you to be aware of many effects rather than seeming to box yourself into one view of the text.

- *A thesis statement must come at the end of the first paragraph.*

This is a natural position for a statement of focus, but it's not the only one. Some theses can be stated in the opening sentences of an essay; others need a paragraph or two of introduction; others can't be fully formulated until the end.

- *A thesis statement must be one sentence in length.*

Clear writing is more important than rules like these. Use two or three sentences if you need them. A complex argument may require a whole tightly-knit paragraph to make its initial statement of position.

- *You can't start writing an essay until you have a perfect thesis statement.*

It's usually a good idea to draft a hypothesis or tentative thesis statement near the start of a big project, but changing and refining a thesis is a main task of thinking your way through your ideas as you write a paper. Some projects need to explore the question in depth without being locked in too early. Think in terms of a possible answer to your question, not a rigid commitment. Then go back and reformulate your introduction once you see how far you get.

- *A thesis statement must give three points of support.*

It should indicate that the essay will explain and give evidence for its assertion, but points of evidence don't need to come in any specific number. It's also important to consider the range of possible perspectives (including their pros and cons), not just to gather support for one view.