

How to Write a Good Thesis Statement

I. Thesis Statements: What They Are and What They Do

The thesis statement is the most important element of any paper. It's kind of like duct tape. It is the magic force that holds the universe, or at least your essay, together.

The thesis statement is your argument in a nutshell. Without a strong thesis, papers tend to wander off topic, transitions get to be hard to write, and you too often find yourself in the middle of page 4 wondering why on earth you're writing about duckbilled platypi.

The first thing to keep in mind about a thesis statement is that it is never set in stone. Most writers find that their arguments change between the time they begin writing a paper and the time that they finish it. You only need a rough or working thesis to start drafting a paper so long as you are willing to look critically at that working thesis once you start writing and/or finish writing the paper.

The function of a thesis statement in an academic essay is much like a lawyer's opening argument. It ought to summarize your main argument in a neatly digestible nugget that gives the reader a clear summary of where the paper is going. Academic writing is not like writing a mystery novel in which you do not want to reveal the outcome until the end. The rhetorical style in the United States is a pretty unsubtle thing—subtle like a sledgehammer, in fact. Other cultures do interesting, subtle things with how arguments are made. But not us. The goal is to state your position succinctly and thoroughly at the outset of the paper and then to prove the strength of your position in the rest of the paper.

II. Rules for Thesis Statements

1. First, a thesis should be based on a position taken on an issue rather than simply restating a fact.

For example:

not so great The television series The West Wing has received plenty of critical acclaim because of its fast-paced, realistic dialogue and its seamless blending of humor and drama.

better Despite the acclaim that critics have given to The West Wing for its strong writing, the show tends to portray an overly idealized and nostalgic picture of liberal ideology.

In other words, a thesis statement should take a position on an issue that will split opinion. Not many people would argue that critics have praised The West Wing. That is pretty much a fact that few people would try to controvert. You could, however, make a good working thesis simply by adding that the show does not merit such praise. Also note that the second thesis will allow the paper writer to establish that the show has achieved critical success and then go on to argue something about the show despite that—in this case, that the show portrays a certain kind of liberal ideology as more idealized than it is, perhaps because of viewers' nostalgia for that kind of ideology.

2. Secondly, a thesis should give some reason for the position that you are taking.

not as strong Pornography is inherently demeaning to women and should be banned.

better Because pornography is the ultimate expression of women as objects and because it often depicts them as dismembered, banning pornography might help society begin to see women as more than sex objects.

not as strong The show *The West Wing* has received a great deal of praise for its fast paced dialogue and its seamless union of humor and drama. However, that praise is unwarranted.

better The show *The West Wing* has received a great deal of praise for its fast-paced dialogue and its seamless blending of humor and drama. However, that praise is unwarranted because the show appeals to a narrow group of viewers who share a privileged collection of knowledge, and, as a result, serves only to allow those people to feel smug.

Notice that in the second theses in each case, there are clear rationales for the positions that the authors are taking. Readers may not agree with the rationale or the conclusion that each author comes to, but even the thesis statement gives a clear idea about where this paper is likely to go in order to prove its position.

3. Third, the thesis statement should contain clearly worded and specific language that adequately summarizes the author's position. Many students, used to the five-paragraph essay model, get confused by this rule. The thesis of a five-paragraph essay is specific, in that it lists very specific points that the author will talk about. However, such a thesis fails to adequately summarize the author's point.

not so specific Based on how frequently she wrote about it with a bitter tone, it is clear that Mary Wroth had some issues with love.

not so good at summarizing Harriet Jacobs was worried that if she didn't write her slave story people would not see how her children had been mistreated, how she had been mistreated, and how tough her life was as a result.

better Mary Wroth wrote about love with a bitter tone, perhaps because as a woman who would, in her day, have had to live with more of the consequences of love than a man of her stature, she had more practical reasons to be bitter than her male compatriots in Cupid's game.

better Harriet Jacobs was loathe to tell her story to mainstream American because she feared that those who had not lived under the restrictions of slavery would have found her actions morally objectionable; however, she also feared that not telling her story would do more harm to her abolitionist cause, as so, she wrote her story in an effort to make readers realize in graphic detail the horrors that faced women under slavery.

If you can't summarize your main argument in one or two sentences, you're probably still not entirely clear on what it is you're trying to say. It might be helpful at this point to talk your ideas out with someone.

Generally speaking, instructors will expect your thesis statement to appear in the first or second paragraph of an essay. Much later than that, and you run the risk of losing focus.

Often, if the thesis statement presented at the beginning of the paper is weak, or the paper is a rough draft, the real thesis will appear in the conclusion. This is because in the course of writing, people discover what they really meant to say, so by the time the conclusion rolls around, the writer's thoughts are usually clear enough to articulate an actual thesis. So if you're stuck or if you've just written a first draft, look at the conclusion to see if it says what you meant your introduction to say.

III. The Sheridan Baker Thesis Machine (a method for developing a rough thesis statement)

Step 1: State the topic:

Abigail Adams's letters to her husband

the film *9 to 5*

Internet censorship

The West Wing

Step 2: Turn the topic under consideration into a debatable issue.

Abigail Adams's letters to her husband reveal she had a better understanding of fundamental American values like equality than her husband had.

The film *9 to 5* makes a more feminist comment on working conditions for women than many more recent films.

The internet should not be censored.

The West Wing isn't all that.

Step 3: Add a rationale to help defend your position from those who might disagree. The rationale clause is sometimes called the because clause.

In the letters that Abigail Adams wrote to her husband, her use of appeals to John Adams's values of equality shows that she understood American values at least as well as he did.

The film *9 to 5* shows the interventions that three women make in one company to improve working conditions. Those interventions are structural changes at an institutional level that are more feminist than more contemporary films that address only the role of one woman in the workplace and her success, like Working Girl.

Because the internet was designed to be decentralized and, as a result, is notoriously hard to police, internet censorship would only temporarily stop people's access to problematic material, and so, we should not attempt to censor the Internet.

The show *The West Wing* has received a great deal of praise for its fast-paced dialogue and its seamless blending of humor and drama. However, that praise is unwarranted because the show appeals to a narrow group of viewers who share a privileged collection of knowledge, and, as a result, serves only to allow those people to feel smug.

Abigail Adams understood equality because she makes effective appeals to her husband based on it. But what does the writer mean by values of equality?

This thesis basically defines a feminist film as one that attempts to educate viewers about changes that will help society as a whole rather than exception individuals. The problem? The author isn't very specific about those vague "structural changes at an institutional level."

As written here, this thesis has a logical flaw. It basically says, we shouldn't do this because it is too hard. Watch how in the next step that flaw gets fixed.

The writer clearly thinks that the show appeals only to an elite group of viewers, and that viewers enjoy watching and "getting" the references made in the show. The problem? Every single viewer who watches the show is a well-educated, middle class person living in an urban area? The drama seems a bit too high rated for that to be true.

Step 4: Polish and Qualify

In this step, you want to begin to make your thesis impervious to objections by people who might disagree with you. First, see if you can make the language more *specific*. Secondly, look for ways to add *qualifying words* like usually, often, typically, most, etc. to make the thesis still more specific. Third, consider adding an although clause to show undecided or opposed readers that you've considered more than just your side of the argument.

While John Adams was at the Constitutional Convention shaping the document that would set the tone of equality and liberty for all Americans, Abigail Adams wrote to him, often using frank language to express her concern that in a nation that did not give equality to all people in it, equality would always be an empty value. Because she made her case so strongly that even today her words sometimes seem radical, she has earned a place in American literature that her husband, though a great statesman, does not merit for her plea that the president "Remember the Ladies."

Feminism has long encouraged people to look at institutional causes rather than blaming the individual when inequality is at work. Although other more recent films might seem to portray individual women as having attained greater equality in corporate boardrooms on the silver screen, the more dated film *9 to 5* is more feminist because the women in it manage to create structural changes in their workplace that help all employees, not just themselves.

Despite the fact that the Internet may allow some people, including minors, access to dangerous or inappropriate material, the United States should not adopt strict censorship laws because given the global and decentralized nature of the net, such laws would not only be ineffective, but would not place the United States in a fortuitous position on the world financial and cultural stage.

Although the television series *The West Wing* pays lip service to equality, in fact, the show glorifies a liberal politics particular to well-educated, upper middle class Americans living in urban centers—a fact that is seen in the show's nostalgic and emotional portrayal of the characters' feelings about the same sorts of issues that would appeal primarily to that demographic group.

Granted, it's gotten quite a bit longer. But notice the qualifiers: often, sometimes, even. And notice how much more clear it is where this paper will go.

Notice that the qualifier that defines the importance of looking at the institutional vs. the individual has been moved to a lead in sentence. It is important information, but isn't the heart of the argument. Also notice that the film is called "more feminist," avoiding the tendency to set up a strict binary, or black and white division, between feminist or not feminist.

Ah, see, we've taken the circular logic of the last statement (the Internet shouldn't be censored because you can't censor the internet) and qualified it at the same time that we gave it an argument. Censoring the Internet in only one country won't work, and since the U.S. likes to be a world leader, we shouldn't censor it here because that would put us at a disadvantage in the international arena.

This thesis is much more specific and more focused on most levels, if a slightly different focus than what we started with. That shift is okay. Papers evolve. It's to be expected.

Step 5: Reverse and Test

In step five, switch the although clause with the main clause to confirm that you do have an arguable thesis.

This method can result in a pretty formulaic thesis. But as the examples above show, it can also guide your thinking so that you end up with one that isn't quite so prefabricated feeling.