How to Word Thesis Statements

The wording and syntax (sentence structure) of thesis statements have shaping force in the way a paper develops. Some thesis shapes are more effective than others. Here in condensed form is the advice offered in the upcoming discussion of thesis shapes:

- A productive thesis usually contains *tension*, the balance of this against that.
- Effective thesis statements often begin with a grammatically subordinate idea that will get outweighed by a more pressing claim: "Although X appears to account for Z, Y accounts for it better."
- A less effective thesis shape is the *list*.
- Active verbs and specific nouns produce strong thesis statements.

Put X in Tension with Y

One of the best and most common ways of bringing the thesis into focus is by pitting one possible point of view against another. Good ideas usually take place with the aid of some kind of back pressure, by which we mean that the idea takes shape by pushing against another way of seeing things. This is not the same as setting out to overturn and completely refute one idea in favor of another. In good thesis statements both ideas have some validity, but the forward momentum of the thesis comes from playing the preferred idea off the other one.

TRY THIS 6.1: Spotting the Tension in Good Thesis Statements

Find the tension in each of the following thesis statements. Decide which of the ideas is primary—the one you think the writer plans to support. Then locate the claim or claims in the thesis against which this primary claim will take shape.

1. Emphasis on the self in the history of modern thought may be an exaggeration, but the consequences of this vision of a self set apart have surely been felt in every field of inquiry.
2. We may join with the modern builders in justifying the violence of means—the sculptor's hammer and chisel—by appealing to ends that serve the greater good. Yet too often modern planners and engineers would justify the creative destruction of habitat as necessary for doubtful utopias.
3. The derogation of middlebrow, in short, has gone much too far. It's time to bring middlebrow out of its cultural closet, to hail its emollient properties, to trumpet its mending virtues. For middlebrow not only entertains, but also educates—pleasurably training us to appreciate high art.

Look at the following two thesis statements. Notice that there is tension in each, which results from the defining pressure of one idea against another potentially viable idea.

- It may not seem like it, but "Nice Pants" is as radical a campaign as the original Dockers series.
- If opponents of cosmetic surgery are too quick to dismiss those who claim great psychological benefits, proponents are far too willing to dismiss those who raise concerns. Cosmetic surgery might make individual people happier, but in the aggregate it makes life worse for everyone.

In the first thesis sentence, the primary idea is that the new advertising campaign for Dockers trousers is radical. The back pressure against which this idea takes shape is that this new campaign may not seem radical. The writer will demonstrate the truth of both of these claims, rather than overturning one and then championing the other.

The same can be said of the parts of the second thesis statement. One part of the thesis makes claims for the benefits of cosmetic surgery. The forward momentum of the thesis statement comes from the back pressure of this idea against the idea that cosmetic surgery will also make life worse for everyone. Notice that the thesis statement does not simply say, "Cosmetic surgery is bad." The writer's job will be to demonstrate that the potential harm of cosmetic surgery outweighs the benefits, but the benefits won't just be dismissed. Both ideas are to some extent true. Neither idea, in other words, is "a straw man"—the somewhat deceptive argumentative practice of setting up a dummy position solely because it is easy to knock down. A straw man does not strengthen a thesis statement because it fails to provide genuine back pressure.

Thesis Shapes: Subordination Versus Listing

The tension between ideas in a thesis statement is often reflected in the statement's grammatical structure. Thesis statements often combine two possible claims into one formulation, with the primary claim in the main clause and the qualifying or limiting or opposing claim in a subordinate clause: "Although X appears to account for Z, Y accounts for it better." You can more or less guarantee your thesis will possess the necessary tension by starting your thesis statement with the word "Although" or with the phrase "While it seems that . . ." or with the "yes, but" or "if x, nonetheless y" formulation. (See Chapter 10 on subordination.)

The advantage of this subordinate construction (and the reason that so many theses are set up this way) is that the subordinated idea helps you to define your own position by giving you something to define it against. The subordinate clause of a thesis helps you to demonstrate that there is, in fact, an issue involved—that is, more than one possible explanation for the evidence you are considering.

The order of clauses in a thesis statement often predicts the shape of the paper, guiding both the writer and the reader. A thesis that begins with a subordinate clause ("Although X . . . ") usually leads to a paper in which the first part deals with the claims for X and then moves to fuller embrace of Y.

A less effective thesis shape that can also predict the shape of a paper is the *list*. This is the shape of five-paragraph form: the writer lists three points and then devotes a paragraph to each. But the list does not specify the connections among its various components, and, as a result, the writer is less inclined to explore the relationship among ideas.

How to Revise Weak Thesis Statements: Make the Verbs Active and the Nouns Specific

Weak thesis statements can be quickly identified by their word choice and syntax (sentence structure). Take, for example, the thesis statement "There are many similarities and differences between the Carolingian and Burgundian Renaissances." This thesis relies mostly on nouns rather than verbs; the nouns announce a broad heading, but the verb doesn't do anything with or to the nouns. In grammatical terms, such thesis statements don't predicate (affirm or assert something about the subject of a proposition). Instead, they rely on anemic verbs like is or *are*, which function as equal signs that link general nouns with general adjectives rather than specify more complex relationships.

Replacing is or *are* with stronger verbs usually causes you to rank ideas in some order of importance, to assert some conceptual relation among them, and to advance some sort of claim. Thus, we could revise the weak thesis above as "The differences between the Carolingian and Burgundian Renaissances outweigh the similarities." While this reformulation remains quite general, it at least begins to direct the writer along a more particular line of argument.

In sum, the best way to remedy the problem of the overly broad thesis is to move toward specificity in word choice, in sentence structure, and in idea. If you find yourself writing "The economic situation is bad," consider revising it to "The tax policies of the current administration threaten to reduce the tax burden on the middle class by sacrificing education and health care programs for everyone."

Here's the problem/solution in schematic form:

Broad Noun	**+ Weak Verb**	**+ Vague, Evaluative Modifier**
The economic situation	is	bad
Specific Noun	**+ Active Verb**	**+ Specific Modifier**
(The) tax policies (of the current administration)	threaten to reduce (the tax burden on the middle class)	by sacrificing education and health care programs for everyone

By eliminating the weak thesis formula—broad noun plus is plus vague evaluative adjective—a writer is compelled to qualify, or define carefully, each of the terms in the original proposition, arriving at a more particular and conceptually rich assertion.

Is It Okay to Phrase a Thesis as a Question?

The answer is yes and no. Phrasing a thesis as a question makes it more difficult for both the writer and the reader to be sure of the direction the paper will take, because a question doesn't make an overt claim. Questions, however, can clearly imply claims. And many writers, especially in the early, exploratory stages of drafting, will begin with a question.

As a general rule, use thesis questions cautiously, particularly in final drafts. While a thesis question often functions well to spark your thinking, it can allow you to evade the responsibility of making some kind of claim. Especially in the drafting stage, a question posed overtly can provide focus, but only if you then answer it with what could become a first statement of thesis—a working thesis.