

The Thesis Statement

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What is a thesis statement?

The thesis sentence in the essay has the same function as the topic sentence in the paragraph. That is, the theme or the main idea of the essay is introduced in an independent sentence at the end of the introductory paragraph of the essay. The thesis statement should contain main points which will be supported and proved in the body paragraphs. The order of these main points given in the thesis statement should be followed in the body paragraphs as well.

What is the main problem with thesis statements?

The thesis statement should be neither too broad nor too narrow. Otherwise, it becomes too difficult to write an effective essay. If it is too broad, it is not possible to support it in a limited essay. If it is too narrow, it is difficult to expand it into a paper:

Too broad: Disease has had many effects on human history.

Appropriate: In the mid-1980s, AIDS changed people's attitudes to casual sex and recreational drug use.

Too broad: Insects are fascinating creatures.

Appropriate: Strength, organization and communication make the ant one of the nature's most successful insects.

In the preceding examples, the first sentences are too broad to be supported in a limited essay. However, a thesis statement must be narrow enough to be supported in an essay.

Too narrow: The speed limit near my home is sixty-five miles per hour.

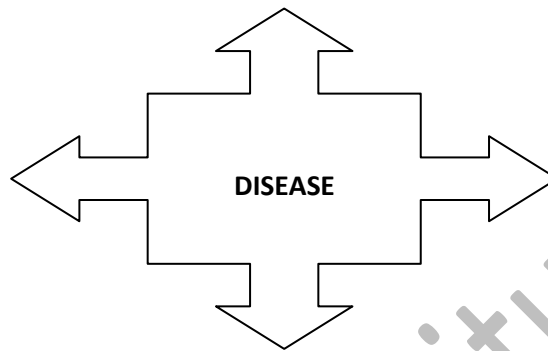
Appropriate: The speed limit near my home should be lowered to fifty-five miles per hour for several reasons.

Too narrow: A hurricane hit southern Florida last summer.

Appropriate: Federal officials made a number of mistakes in their response to the recent Florida hurricane.

In the preceding examples, the first sentences are too narrow to have room for any support to be given because they are simple facts. However, a thesis statement must be broad enough to require support in an essay.

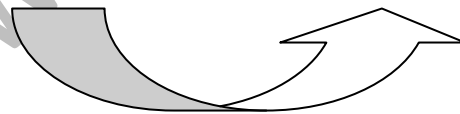
If the topic is too broad, there will be too many choices to write about, which is not possible in a limited essay:



When the topic is only about a simple fact, it can only explain itself. There is no other possible support:



The speed limit near my home is sixty-five miles per hour.



How do we make a good thesis statement from a topic?

The thesis statement must clearly state the writer's controlling idea. The following shows the process of forming a thesis statement from a general topic:

Topic: Smoking

Narrowed topic: Effects of smoking

Controlling idea: negative effects of smoking on social relations and health

Thesis statement: Smoking affects social relations and health negatively.

It is expected that this essay will explain negative effects of smoking on social relations in the first body paragraph and then negative effects of smoking on health in the second body paragraph.

Topic: Marriage

Narrowed topic: Honeymoon

Controlling idea: Honeymoon is not a good start for marriage because of the stress and financial worries.

Thesis statement: A honeymoon is perhaps the worst way to begin a marriage because of the stress and financial worries.

Topic: Children

Narrowed topic: Disciplining of children

Controlling idea: ways of disciplining children

Thesis statement: There are several effective ways of disciplining children.

Topic: Sports

Narrowed topic: Players' salaries

Controlling idea: negative effects of players' high salaries on the game, the fans and the values

Thesis statement: Players' high salaries have negative effects on the game, the fans and the values our children are developing.

How can we avoid 'vague' thesis statements?

The thesis statement and its controlling idea should be as specific as possible. By writing a specific thesis statement, the topic is focused and the readers get a clear idea of what will follow. There are two ways to make a vague thesis statement more specific:

1. Vague words are replaced with more exact words and vague ideas are replaced with more exact information:

Vague thesis statement: My recent trip to Florida was really bad.

Revised thesis statement: My recent trip to Florida was disappointing because of the bad weather conditions and high prices.

In the first thesis statement above there are two problems:

- The inexact words *really bad* do not say specifically enough *why* the trip was bad or what the rest of the essay might discuss.
- The statement does not have a clear controlling idea.

The second thesis statement is more specific. The words really bad are replaced by the more exact word disappointing. In addition, the writer has added more complete information about why the trip was disappointing. From this thesis statement, it is clear that the essay will discuss how the weather upset the writer's plans in the first body paragraph and how the prices affected the trip negatively in the second body paragraph.

2. Thesis statement can be made more specific by stating the natural divisions of the subject. If a subject naturally has two or three divisions, stating these in the thesis can set up an outline for the entire essay:

Vague thesis statement: The movie *Southern Smoke* seemed unrealistic.

Revised thesis statement: The costumes, the dialogue and the plot of the movie *Southern Smoke* all seemed unrealistic.

The first thesis statement above gives little specific direction to the writer or the reader. However, the second thesis statement actually sets up a plan for the whole essay. The writer has divided the subject into three parts – the costumes, the dialogue and the plot – and one paragraph will be devoted to discuss the realism of each aspect. Following the order in the thesis statement, the costumes will be discussed in the first body paragraph, the dialogue in the second body paragraph and the plot in the third one.

Samples:

Vague thesis statement: Watching TV news programmes has its good points.

Revised thesis statement: Watching news programmes on TV can make people more informed and responsible citizens.

Vague thesis statement: Tai chi is a good sport.

Revised thesis statement: The practice of tai chi can improve one's concentration, health and peace of mind.

Vague thesis statement: Being in nature is good for people.

Revised thesis statement: Spending time in nature can promote inner peace and understanding of the world.

Vague thesis statement: Job markets will grow in 2011.

Revised thesis statement: The fastest-growing job markets through the year 2011 will be in the computer and medical fields.

Vague thesis statement: The first day on a new job can be a bad experience.

Revised thesis statement: The first day on a new job can be nerve-racking because of meeting new people and finding the way around a new place.

Vague thesis statement: College is stressful for many people.

Revised thesis statement: College is stressful for many people due to stress over grades and worries about being accepted.

Vague thesis statement: Buying a used car is better than buying a new one.

Revised thesis statement: Buying a used car is better than buying a new one since used cars are less likely to be stolen and they do not lose their value quickly.

Vague thesis statement: Loneliness can teach people many things.

Revised thesis statement: A period of loneliness can teach people to use their creativity, sort out their values and feel empathy for others.

Vague thesis statement: Learning to write is a hard process.

Revised thesis statement: Learning to write takes work, patience and a sense of humor.

Vague thesis statement: Watching ads on TV is not good for children.

Revised thesis statement: Adverts for toys on television teach children to be greedy, competitive and snobbish.

Vague thesis statement: Driving at night is dangerous.

Revised thesis statement: Driving at night is more dangerous than during the day because of the problems caused by poor visibility and fatigue.

Vague thesis statement: Cats and dogs are different in some ways.

Revised thesis statement: Cats and dogs differ in terms of pet management, cost and accommodations.

References

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