

Mount Saint Vincent University
Writing Resource Centre

Handout Topic: Thesis Statements

What is a thesis statement?

A thesis statement is the central argument of an essay. Do not confuse the thesis statement with the topic of the essay. The thesis is a *focused* discussion of the topic, and serves as a guide to the rest of the essay. A well-written thesis statement is usually one sentence long, and appears at the end of the introductory paragraph or section.

Thesis Statement Tips

- the thesis statement should be appropriate for the length of the essay; a 1500 word essay will require a much narrower thesis statement than a 5000 word essay will.

- make sure the thesis statement is easily identifiable. This is why it is often helpful (whenever possible) to position the thesis statement at the end of the opening paragraph. On the other hand, it is not advisable to announce a thesis statement with sentences that begin “In this paper,” “The purpose of this paper is,” or other such statements.

- do not forget that the thesis statement includes the conclusions that have been reached about the topic.

- keep the thesis statement flexible until the rest of your essay has been drafted. After drafting the body of the essay, return to the thesis statement and revise it again, if necessary.

- remember that a statement of fact cannot be a thesis statement. A good thesis statement must be debatable.

Examples:

Suppose this is the working thesis statement:

e.g. The Beatles can be considered the best band of all time.

This thesis statement is too broad; no reasons are provided for why this statement might be true. Potential readers have no sense of where this essay is leading them. As well, the phrase “can be considered” weakens the argument considerably.

e.g. The Beatles' continuing influence on contemporary music and their lasting commercial success makes them the most successful rock group of all time.

This statement has specified how the writer intends to back up her claim. As well, she has made her statement more specific by replacing “band” with “rock group” and “best” with “most successful.”

A second example:

e.g. Computers will someday lead to the destruction of humankind.

Again, this statement is far too broad and is almost impossible to defend successfully.

e.g. The military's increased use of computer technology to guide missiles more precisely means that although the world's nuclear arsenal has decreased in the last twenty years, the weapons that remain pose an even greater threat to humanity.

This second statement specifies what kind of computers the writer considers a threat, and narrows the assertion to one that could be reasonably defended in an essay. This second version also provides a fairly clear map to the rest of the essay; the first version does not.

Exercises: *Make the following preliminary thesis statements suitable for a short essay.*

1. Government corruption is affecting voter turnout.
2. Mount Saint Vincent's is one of Halifax's best universities.
3. Hockey is Canada's favourite game.