

# Thesis Statement Basics

## I. What is a thesis statement?

### A. A thesis statement is a declarative sentence.

1. Thesis statements are **not titles or fragments**.

**Title:** My First Smoking Experience

**Thesis:** Although all my friends thought cigarettes were stylish, I discovered that smoking is actually a disgusting habit with many health risks.

**Fragment:** A wanderer and warrior, a lover and a husband, a beggar and a king.

**Thesis:** In Homer's epic *Odyssey*, Odysseus' allegorical voyage across the seas parallels his voyage into true manhood, in which he must make peace between the many faces of his nature: wanderer and warrior, lover and husband, beggar and king.

2. Thesis statements are **not questions**.

**Question:** Should we become more aware of our environment?

**Thesis:** We should enjoy our environment without any reservations, knowing that the genome revolution will replenish any disappearing resources, virtual reality will provide a better-than-real experience of the outdoors and the museum-park of the future will offer urban elite all the "wilderness safaris" anyone could ever want.

3. Thesis statements are **not commands**.

**Command:** Observe what happened to me during my first white water rafting experience.

**Thesis:** My first white water rafting experience challenged my body, my mind and my spirit, transforming me into an adult.

### B. A thesis statement is an arguable idea.

1. Thesis statements are **not facts**.

**Fact:** Cortez conquered Mexico in 1509.

**Thesis:** The colonial mentality that prompted Cortez' barbaric invasion of Mexico brought about not an advance in native society but a destruction of Aztec culture.

2. Thesis statements are **not announcements** of the author's purpose or assignment.

**Announcement:** In this paper I will discuss the causes and effects of the French Revolution and then argue as to whether or not it was successful.

**Thesis:** Though the reasons for the French Revolution were noble – liberte, fraternite, egalite – the effects were devastating, ultimately leading to the unsuccessful reinstatement of the monarchy and the restructuring of a classist society into a militaristic one.

3. Thesis statements are **not obvious**.

**Obvious:** The apple is a symbol of temptation.

**Thesis:** Deeply paradoxical in nature, the fruit of Paradise offers itself continually to our imaginations in fairytales and myths; the apple as symbol encompasses the worlds of good and evil, beauty and poison, life and death, exile and revelation.

4. Thesis statements are **not unarguable personal opinions**.

**Opinion:** My favorite color is green.

**Thesis:** Colors do more than indicate personal preference: they reveal emotions, indicate purpose, act symbolically and influence subconscious thoughts.

C. A thesis statement is **specific** and **narrowed**.

1. Thesis statements are **not broad overgeneralizations**.

**Broad:** All liberals contribute to the permissiveness broadly sanctioned by American culture.

**Narrow:** Many middle of the road liberals today are increasingly concerned about young people's experimentation with drugs, alcohol and sex.

2. Thesis statements **cover only one topic**.

**Many topics:** The theme, characters, setting, irony, conflicts, viewpoint, and plot all contribute to making Madame Bovary a tragedy.

**One topic:** Flaubert's Emma Bovary is a tragic character because, never seeing reality, she misses some important clues that her life has gone awry, and she falls from her social "height" into prostitution.

3. Thesis statements often **focus the essay and guide its direction**.

**Unfocused:** Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* is a candid portrayal of Chinese American mother-daughter relationships.

**Focused:** In *The Joy Luck Club*, Amy Tan skillfully illustrates how cultural, generational, and internal conflicts between Chinese American mothers and daughters all add to the difficulty and character of the immigrant experience.

**D. Thesis statements are worthy of development in an academic paper and interest an adult audience.**

1. Thesis statements are **not simplistic**.

**Simplistic:** Cats and dogs look different and act differently.

**More interesting:** Though seemingly adorable and tame, mountain lion cubs are actually wild, dangerous predators.

2. Thesis statements are **not immature and tasteless**.

We do not write about bathroom jokes, etc. Say no more.

**Note:** Always check with your instructor if you are unsure about the suitability of your thesis for your audience.

**E. Thesis statements are concise.**

**Wordy:** Censorship should be banned by everyone in all circumstances and all states in the nation because it destroys the rights of free speech guaranteed to us by the Constitution of the United States since the Constitution was written by John Hancock and all of the other statesmen.

**Concise:** Censorship should be banned in the United States because it destroys the constitutionally guaranteed right of free speech.

**II. The makings of a thesis.**

**A. Decide on your topic.**

poetry in my English textbook

**B. Narrow your topic.**

contrast gender characteristics in two poems

Emily Dickinson's "Because I could not stop for Death" contrasted with John Donne's "Death Be Not Proud"

**C. Put your topic in a sentence.**



Emily Dickinson's "*Because I could not stop for Death*" is different from John Donne's "*Death Be Not Proud*."

- D. **Add your argument, viewpoint, or opinion to your topic to make your thesis persuasive.**

Emily Dickinson's "*Because I could not stop for Death*" is essentially a more feminine poem, while John Donne's "*Death Be Not Proud*" is more masculine.

- E. **Elaborate on your thesis so that it addresses all parts of your assignment.**

Although Emily Dickinson and John Donne both personify death in their poems, the tone, language and images are clearly feminine in "*Because I could not stop for Death*" and masculine in "*Death Be Not Proud*."

- F. **Organize your thesis to guide the direction of your paper.**

Although Emily Dickinson and John Donne both personify death in their poems, the images, language and tone are clearly feminine in "*Because I could not stop for Death*" and masculine in "*Death Be Not Proud*."

- G. **Edit your thesis for content, word choice, precision and mechanics.**

Although Emily Dickinson and John Donne both personify death in their poems, the images, language and tone clearly reveal a woman's perspective in "*Because I could not stop for Death*" and a man's perspective in "*Holy Sonnet 10*."

III. **Most mainstream high school English teachers and college professors want you to express your thesis in one sentence.**

- A. **PLEASE NOTE!!!!!!!!!!!!!! I both agree and disagree with this approach.**

1. **On the one hand, clarity and succinctness often go hand in hand.**
2. **However, you must not sacrifice the crux of your thesis AND ESPECIALLY YOUR ARGUMENT/VIEWPOINT/OPINION/ATTITUDE/THOUGHTS/HYPOTHESIS/WHY?? to get all of your thoughts into one sentence.**
3. **A two sentence thesis can work brilliantly as well.**
4. **In longer papers (5 page, 10 page and 20 page papers) a one sentence thesis often oversimplifies your ARGUMENT to the point of speciousness and you end up arguing the obvious – A DEADLY SIN.**

- B. **Examples of the mainstream one sentence thesis masterfully crafted.**

1. **Rachel, in the case of "*Eleven*," [topic, passage, what?] is portrayed through vivid imagery and a first person subjective point of view**

[*element, literary term or how?*] as a small girl in a vast and unending universe [*topic, passage, what?*] who wishes for the wisdom to react to both usual and unusual situations in her life. [*argument or hypothesis or why??*] (Brian Baumgartner)

2. In order to encourage readers who are in unfavorable conditions, [*argument or hypothesis or why??*] Emerson, implying that misfortune and fortune can exist at the same time, [*topic, passage, what?*] expresses his belief that opposing ideas are both contradictory and true in our life [*argument or hypothesis or why??*] by using a series of paradoxes. [*element, literary term or how?*] (Lynn Zhao)
  - C. Notice in the two examples above that the components of a thesis can be crafted together in any order and provide for many organizational options.
  - D. Notice also that both writers make strong universal statements about the human condition.
- IV. Finally, a recapitulation of the down and dirty opening paragraph when you have a very difficult prompt and/or passage/poem and you only have 40 minutes to create your unforgettable masterpiece. This will free up time to work on the body of the response.

A. **The Introductory Paragraph**

1. "hook" opening – something that seizes the reader's imagination
    - a. anecdote (personal or historical/ cultural)
    - b. an insightful comment on the human condition
    - c. something truly beautiful from the passage/ poem restated in graphically brilliant terms
  2. the "hook" must relate very tightly to the thesis itself
  3. your **battleplan or argument points** – how you will prove this thesis [i.e. in formal literary analysis for the A.P. exam]
    - a. first person subjective point of view
    - b. imagery
    - c. repetition
  4. the **thesis argument** – meaning what's the point???????? of your entire paper – the universal statement about the human condition as it relates to the themes of the passage/ poem and to the requirements of the prompt
    - a. one sentence
    - b. two is fine if that's how it's coming together
    - c. mention the author/ poet and title
- B. IT IS ALSO FINE TO REVERSE THE ORDER OF #3 AND #4.
- C. IT'S GREAT TO COMBINE #3 AND #4 INTO ONE SENTENCE BUT DO NOT WASTE YOUR TIME TRYING IF IT'S NOT COMING TOGETHER FAIRLY EASILY.

D. IT IS ALSO WISE TO END THE INTRODUCTORY PARAGRAPH WITH A SENTENCE THAT EASILY BRIDGES TO THE TOPIC SENTENCE OF THE NEXT PARAGRAPH.

E. IT IS ALSO IMPERATIVE TO IMMEDIATELY WORK ON 'MATURING' ONE'S THESIS STATEMENT -

1. **one attempt -**

She is a child who wants to be bolder/older/wiser/more mature.

2. **now rewrite that thought using any one of the following words -**  
transition/transformation/metamorphosis