

Developing Your Thesis

Why is the thesis statement often considered the most important sentence in a research paper?

“The thesis sentence is typically that ONE sentence in the paper that asserts, controls, and structures the entire argument. Without a strong persuasive, thoughtful thesis, a paper might seem unfocused, weak, and not worth the reader's time.”

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A good thesis will generally have the following characteristics:

1. A good thesis sentence will make a claim.

This does not mean that you have to reduce an idea to an "either/or" proposition and then take a stand. Rather, you need to develop an interesting perspective that you can support and defend. This perspective must be more than an observation. "America is violent" is an observation. "Americans are violent because they are fearful" (the position that Michael Moore takes in *Bowling for Columbine*) is an argument. Why? Because it posits a perspective. It makes a claim.

Put another way, a good thesis sentence will inspire (rather than quiet) other points of view. One might argue that America is violent because of its violent entertainment industry. Or because of the proliferation of guns. Or because of the disintegration of the family. In short, if your thesis is positing something that no one can (or would wish to) argue with, then it's not a very good thesis.

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2. A good thesis sentences will control the entire argument.

Your thesis sentence determines what you are required to say in a paper. It also determines what you cannot say. Every paragraph in your paper exists in order to support your thesis. Accordingly, if one of your paragraphs seems irrelevant to your thesis you have two choices: get rid of the paragraph, or rewrite your thesis.

Understand that you do not have a third option: you cannot simply stick the idea in without preparing the reader for it in your thesis. The thesis is like a contract between you and your reader. If you introduce ideas that the reader is not prepared for, you've violated that contract.

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3. A good thesis will provide a structure for your argument.

A good thesis not only signals to the reader *what* your argument is, but *how* your argument will be presented. In other words, your thesis sentence should either directly or indirectly suggest the structure of your argument to your reader.

Say, for example, that you are going to argue that "American fearfulness expresses itself in three curious ways: A, B, and C." In this case, the reader understands that you are going to have three important points to cover, and that these points will appear in a certain order. If you suggest a particular ordering principle and then abandon it, the reader will feel betrayed, irritated, and confused.

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- Does my thesis sentence attempt to answer (or at least to explore) a challenging intellectual question?
- Is the point I am making one that would generate discussion and argument, or is it one that would leave people asking, "So what?"
- Is my thesis too vague? Too general? Should I focus on some more specific aspect of my topic?
- Does my thesis deal directly with the topic at hand, or is it a declaration of my personal feelings?
- Does my thesis indicate the direction of my argument? Does it suggest a structure for my paper?
- Does my introductory paragraph define terms important to my thesis? If I am writing a research paper, does my introduction "place" my thesis within the larger, ongoing scholarly discussion about my topic?
- Is the language in my thesis vivid and clear? Have I structured my sentence so that the important information is in the main clause? Have I used subordinate clauses to house less important information? Have I used parallelism to show the relationship between parts of my thesis? In short, is this thesis the very best sentence that it can be?

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Understand that you can revise the thesis sentence above in a number of ways. Ask yourself:

- Is my argument clear?
- Does it present the logic and the structure of my paper?
- Does it emphasize the points I want to emphasize?

The thesis statement should appear at the end of the introduction.

Writing the Introduction

A good thesis relies on a strong, clear introduction to lay the groundwork . The introduction provides the writer with the opportunity to get the reader (the instructor) interested in the paper.

The introduction needs to place the thesis into some larger context. Consider the following thesis statement, “In order to achieve adequate preparedness against the threat of IED-based terrorist attacks against the United States requires strengthening appropriate, multi-agency capabilities to target levels of performance at Federal, State, and local levels.”

While this might be considered a strong thesis statement, by itself it does not provide enough of a context for its argument . Think about what information you might include in your introduction to support the above thesis statement?

Writing the Introduction

Potential points the writer might use to support the thesis statement:

- The proven effectiveness demonstrated through continued terrorist use of improvised explosive devices (IEDs - to include vehicle improvised explosive devices [VIEDs] and improvised incendiary devices [IIDs]) against coalition forces and civilians in Iraq and Afghanistan
- IEDs have been used against the American Homeland (Oklahoma City, New York City-World Trade Center bombing, 1993, Underwear bomber, Time Square bomber, etc.)
- DHS has implemented the National Incident Management System to standardize Incident Command nationwide in response to HSPD-5
- DHS risk-based assessments recognize IEDs as a priority national threat
- DHS recognizes the importance of capabilities-based preparedness against terrorist threats that extend beyond local boundaries
- Multi-agency level operations require multi-agency preparedness (planning, training, exercises-see DHS HSEEP manuals)

Setting the Stage for Your Paper

After some initial research, note taking, and drafting an outline for your paper, a brief introduction that summarizes some the issues from the previous slide should provide the context for the thesis statement introduced earlier and restated below.

Remember, the thesis statement must be the last sentence of the introductory paragraph and the reader (the instructor) must be able to read it and say, “I get it, it sounds credible, and I am looking forward to reading how the writer (that is you) supports/defends the thesis statement given the context in which it was stated.”

Proposed thesis statement

“In order to achieve adequate preparedness against the threat of IED-based terrorist attacks against the United States requires strengthening appropriate, multi-agency capabilities to target levels of performance at Federal, State, and local levels. “

Instructor Approval REQUIRED

The introduction and thesis statement proposal is due by the end of Week Four. The reason I require final approval is because it gives me the opportunity to work with each of you and to make sure you get your paper off to a good start. The sooner you submit it, the sooner I get it back to you, the more time you have.

