

Thesis Statements

The starting point and governing idea of every essay is its thesis: without the thesis, the essay has no clear purpose. A thesis is a statement or assertion about the topic. It is made near the beginning of the essay, and it controls the whole development. The thesis has several functions.

1. When you are planning the essay, formulating a thesis is a way of narrowing a topic to a single idea. You choose a topic (*Schedules*) and then you find something to say about the topic. This gives you a direction and point of view:

Keeping to a schedule helps me to complete my work in busy times.

Note that the thesis always expresses one main idea. It can be a simple sentence, as above, or a complex sentence with a subordinate clause modifying a main clause:

Although the desert seems empty, it offers an ideal habitat for creatures adapted to it.

The thesis statement can never be a compound sentence containing two or more main ideas:

No: Seat belts are one method of reducing highway fatalities, and air bags are another.

This would require two essays. However, you could revise this thesis to make a single assertion:

Although seat belts provide some protection if they are used conscientiously, the universal use of air bags would dramatically reduce highway deaths.

Before you have completed your reading and thinking, you may be unsure about the final form of your thesis. Compose a tentative or working thesis, and use it as a means of directing your thought or research. You can modify this thesis as you go along, as new information modifies your opinion about the subject.

2. When you are drafting the essay, the thesis gives you control over your material. The thesis is the central point you are making, and only material that relates to it is relevant to your essay. The thesis must be a point that is worth making, rather than an obvious or vague statement.

No: Air pollution is a terrible problem in our cities.

The thesis must also be a statement that requires the support of facts and arguments; it cannot be a simple statement of fact itself.

No: Air pollution first became apparent in the 1960s.

Instead, you can think of the thesis as the position you are taking on the topic, or the overall point you want to make. The purpose of your essay is to give the facts or arguments that back it up. Every paragraph should develop some aspect of the thesis.

3. When you are composing your essay, the thesis statement offers the most efficient method of introduction. Normally the introductory paragraph leads up the thesis (by giving some background to the subject, or by highlighting some specific aspect). The thesis is both the culmination of the introduction, and a bridge into the body of the essay. It tells the reader what to expect. The student introduction that follows provides an example of this. It begins with an overview of the secondary characters in relation to the main character in a novel, and then focuses on the specific role of one of them.

Although Morag is the central character in *The Diviners*, her life and quest for self only derive their meaning through the help and guidance of some other very essential characters. Christie plays the most obvious role of nurturant and mentor; however, Jules is just as integral a part of Morag's life, though perhaps in a more intimate sense. He acts the part of prophet, and, in the deepest sense, of Morag's spiritual guide. In essence, he, along with Christie, provides Morag with the foundation and essential tools needed to begin her long journey towards self-actualization and towards the true meaning of life. [student introduction]

Beginning an essay with a thesis statement offers such obvious advantages in clarity and directness that it is almost universal in academic writing. Only occasionally might you decide not to begin with the thesis. If you were investigating a complex question, your essay would begin with the question (which would focus the purpose like a thesis) and move towards an answer. If you were writing persuasively, and thought that the reader needed to be prepared for the thesis statement, you might choose to lead towards it by the strength of your arguments.

4. One particular pattern of thesis statement gives the reader a concise preview of the order of ideas in the essay. This links the topic with the main subdivisions:

In John Updike's short story, "A Sense of Shelter," the author gives his reader a detailed insight into the life of William, an insecure teenager. With skilled description, he illustrates the fantasy world that William creates and reveals the love which William believes he feels for his childhood friend, Mary Landis. However, William does not really love Mary at all. Because she is just a queen in his fantasy world, because his descriptions of her are contemptuous rather than loving, and because he chooses the safety of his imaginary world over her, it is clear that William has no affection for Mary Landis. [student introduction]

Here the three parallel *because . . .* clauses highlight the three main supporting arguments to be developed in the essay.

In short essays, a thesis of this kind can be a substitute for an outline. The parallel expression of the subdivisions in the thesis emphasizes their parallel function in the structure of the essay.

5. Finally, the thesis is helpful when you revise the essay. Keep it in mind when you reread: does everything tie in with the thesis, and are further arguments or facts needed to establish the validity of the thesis? In an academic essay, you should establish your thesis beyond reasonable doubt. Be honest in taking into account information that might contradict the thesis. It's better to modify your thesis to account for this information than to suppress the information.