

Week 6 materials

Advice on How to Write a Thesis

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Part 1: How to Generate a Thesis Statement

A good thesis statement:

- takes on a subject upon which reasonable people could disagree
- expresses one main idea that can be adequately defended by quoting from the articles you have gathered
- asserts your conclusions about a subject

Let's see how to generate a thesis statement for a social policy paper.

a. Brainstorm the topic.

Let's say that you are interested in the problems posed by drug addiction. You find that you are interested more specifically in the problems of crack babies, babies born to mothers addicted to crack cocaine.

You start out with a thesis statement like this:

Crack babies.

This fragment isn't a thesis statement. Instead, it simply indicates a general subject. Furthermore, your reader doesn't know what you want to say about crack kids.

b. Narrow the topic

Your readings about the topic, however, have led you to the conclusion that not only do these babies

have a difficult time surviving premature births and withdrawal symptoms, but their lives will be even harder as they grow up because they are likely to be raised in an environment of poverty and neglect. You think that there should be programs to help these children.

You change your thesis to look like this:

Programs for crack kids.

This fragment not only announces your subject, but it focuses on one main idea: programs. Furthermore, it raises a subject upon which reasonable people could disagree, because while most people might agree that something needs to be done for these children, not everyone would agree on what should be done or who should do it. You should note that this fragment is not a thesis statement because your reader doesn't know your conclusions on the topic.

c. Take a position on the topic.

After reflecting on the topic a little while longer, you decide that what you really want to say about this topic is that in addition to programs for crack babies, the government should develop programs to help crack children cope and compete.

You revise your thesis to look like this:

More attention should be paid to the environment crack kids grow up in.

This statement asserts your position, but the terms "more attention" and "the environment" are vague.

d. Use specific language.

You decide to explain what you mean about "the environment", so you write:

Experts estimate that half of crack babies will grow up in home environments lacking rich cognitive and emotional stimulation.

This statement is specific, but it isn't a thesis. It merely reports a statistic instead of making an assertion.

e. Make an assertion based on clearly stated support.

You finally revise your thesis statement one more time to look like this:

Because half of all crack babies are likely to grow up in homes lacking good cognitive and emotional stimulation, the federal government should finance programs to supplement parental care for crack kids.

Notice how the thesis answers the question, "Why should anything be done for crack kids, and who should do it?" When you started thinking about the paper, you may not have had a specific question in mind, but as you became more involved in the topic, your ideas became more specific. Your thesis changed to reflect your new insights.

Part 2: How to Tell a Strong Thesis Sentence from a Weak One

a. A strong thesis takes some sort of stand.

Remember that your thesis needs to show your conclusions about a subject. For example, if you are writing a paper for a class on fitness, you might be asked to choose a popular weight-loss product to evaluate. Here are two thesis statements:

There are some negative and positive aspects to the Banana Herb Tea Supplement.

This is a weak thesis. First, it fails to take a stand. Second, the phrase "negative and positive aspects" are vague.

Because Banana Herb Tea Supplement promotes rapid weight loss that results in the loss of muscle and lean body mass, it poses a potential danger to customers.

This is a strong thesis because it takes a stand.

b. A strong thesis justifies discussion.

Your thesis should indicate the point of the discussion. If your assignment is to write a paper on kinship systems, using your own family as an example, you might come up with either of these two thesis statements:

My family is an extended family.

This is a weak thesis because it states an observation. Your reader won't be able to why you made this statement, and will probably stop reading.

While most American families would view consanguineal marriage as a threat to the nuclear family structure, many Iranian families, like my own, believe that these marriages help reinforce kinship ties in an extended family.

This is a strong thesis because it shows how your experience contradicts a widely-accepted view. A good strategy for creating a strong thesis is to show that the topic is controversial. Readers will be interested in reading the rest of the essay to see how you support your point.

c. A strong thesis expresses one main idea.

Readers need to be able to see that your paper has one main point. If your thesis expresses more than one idea, then you might confuse your readers about the subject of your paper. For example:

Companies need to exploit the marketing potential of the Internet, and web pages can provide both advertising and customer support.

This is a weak thesis statement because the reader can't decide whether the paper is about marketing on the Internet or web pages. To revise the thesis, the relationship between the two ideas needs to become more clear. One way to revise the thesis would be to write:

Because the Internet is filled with tremendous marketing potential, companies should exploit this potential by using web pages that offer both advertising and customer support.

This is a strong thesis because it shows that the two ideas are related. Hint: a great many clear and engaging thesis statements contain adverbial clauses and transitions words like "because", "since", "so", "although", "unless", and "however".

d. A strong thesis statement is specific.

A thesis statement should show exactly what your paper will be about, and will help you keep your research to a narrow range. For example, if you write a paper on hunger, you might say:

World hunger has many causes and effects.

This is a weak thesis statement for two major reasons. First, "world hunger" can't be discussed thoroughly in five or ten pages. Second, "many causes and effects" is vague. You should be able to identify specific causes and effects. A revised thesis might look like this:

Hunger persists in Appalachia because jobs are scarce and farming in the infertile soil is rarely profitable.

This is a strong thesis because it narrows the subject to a more specific and manageable topic and it also identifies the specific causes for the existence of hunger.

Summary:

A thesis statement is an assertion, not a statement of fact or an observation.

- **Fact or observation:** People use many lawn chemicals.
- **Thesis:** People are poisoning the environment with chemicals merely to keep their lawns clean.

A thesis takes a stand rather than announcing a subject.

- **Announcement:** The thesis of this paper is the difficulty of solving our environmental problems.
- **Thesis:** Solving our environmental problems is more difficult than many environmentalists believe.

A thesis is the main idea, not the title. It must be a complete sentence that explains in some detail what you expect to write about.

- **Title:** Social Security and Old Age.

- **Thesis:** Continuing changes in the Social Security System makes it almost impossible to plan intelligently for one's retirement.

A thesis statement is narrow, rather than broad. If the thesis statement is sufficiently narrow, it can be fully supported.

- **Broad:** The American steel industry has many problems.
- **Narrow:** The primary problem in the American steel industry is the lack of funds to renovate outdated plants and equipment.

A thesis statement is specific rather than vague or general.

- **Vague:** Hemingway's war stories are very good.
- **Specific:** Hemingway's stories helped create a new prose style by employing extensive dialogue, shorter sentences, and strong Anglo-Saxon words.

A thesis statement has one main point rather than several main points. More than one point may be too difficult for the reader to understand and the writer to support.

- **More than one main point:** Stephen Hawking's physical disability has not prevented him from becoming a world-renowned physicist, and his book is the subject of a movie.
- **One Main point:** Stephen Hawking's physical disability has not prevented him from becoming a world renowned physicist.

Remember: You can revise your thesis statement at any time while you are writing your essay. Writers often discover what their real purpose and point is after they have begun putting their thoughts into words and then reading what they've written.

Part 3: Placement of your Thesis Statement

The thesis statement usually appears near the beginning of a paper. It can be the first sentence of an essay, but that often feels like a simplistic and unexciting beginning. It more frequently appears at or near the end of the first paragraph or two. Here is the first paragraph of Arthur Schlesinger Jr.'s essay *The Crisis of American Masculinity*. Notice how everything drives the reader toward the last sentence and how that last sentence clearly signals what the rest of this essay is going to do.

What has happened to the American male? For a long time, he seemed utterly confident in his manhood, sure of his masculine role in society, easy and definite in his sense of sexual identity. The frontiersmen of James Fenimore Cooper, for example, never had any concern about masculinity; they were men, and it did not occur to them to think twice about it. Even well into the twentieth century, the heroes of Dreiser, of Fitzgerald, of Hemingway remain men. But one begins to detect a new theme emerging in some of these authors, especially in Hemingway: the theme of the male hero increasingly preoccupied with proving his virility to himself. And by mid-century, the male role had plainly lost its rugged clarity of outline. Today men are more and more conscious of maleness not as a fact but as a problem. The ways by which American men affirm their masculinity are uncertain and obscure. **There are multiplying signs, indeed, that something has gone badly wrong with the American male's conception of himself.**

Here are the first two paragraphs of George Orwell's classic essay, "Politics and the English Language" (1946). Which of these sentences would you say is or are the thesis statement of the essay which is to follow? Everything that this essay contains, then, would have to fit under the "umbrella" of that thesis statement. Underline the sentence you think is the thesis statement.

Most people who bother with the matter at all would admit that the English language is in a bad way, but it is generally assumed that we cannot by conscious action do anything about it. Our civilization is decadent, and our language—so the argument runs—must inevitably share in the general collapse. It follows that any struggle against the abuse of language is a sentimental archaism, like preferring candles to electric light or hansom cabs to aeroplanes. Underneath this lies the half-conscious belief that language is a natural growth and not an instrument which we shape for our own purposes.

Now, it is clear that the decline of a language must ultimately have political and economic causes: it is not due simply to the bad influence of this or that individual writer. But an effect can become a cause, reinforcing the original cause and producing the same effect in an intensified form, and so on indefinitely. A man may take to drink because he feels himself to be a failure, and then fail all the more completely because he drinks. It is rather the same thing that is happening to the English language. It becomes ugly and inaccurate because our thoughts are foolish, but the slovenliness of our language makes it easier for us to have foolish thoughts. The point is that the process is reversible. Modern English, especially written English, is full of bad habits which spread by imitation and which can be avoided if one is willing to take the necessary trouble. If one gets rid of these habits one can think more clearly, and to think clearly is a necessary first step towards political regeneration: so that the fight against bad English is not frivolous and is not the exclusive concern of professional writers. I will come back to this presently, and I hope that by that time the meaning of what I have said here will have become clearer. Meanwhile, here are five specimens of the English language as it is now habitually written.

Part 4: General Advice on Developing a Thesis

a. Use Linear Structure

Once the thesis statement is established, the rest of the essay must "flow". How does this happen? It helps if you create an outline of the paper. The most rudimentary structure for an academic essay, the 5-part essay, is as follows:

Part 1. Introduction, followed by the thesis (3 points to be made)

Part 2. Point 1.

Part 3. Point 2.

Part 4. Point 3.

Part 5. Conclusion

You may need to include a section of informative background data on the topic, plus a section citing and refuting possible objections to your argument.

b. Use Transitions

What are transitions and how are they used?

- transitions are phrases or words that are used to connect one idea to the next
- transitions are used by the author to help the reader progress from one significant idea to the next
- transitions also show the relationship within a paragraph (or even within a sentence) between the main idea and the support the author gives for those ideas
- different transitions do different things...

Transitional devices are like bridges between parts of your paper. They are cues that help the reader to interpret ideas in the way that you, as a writer, want them to be understood. Transitional devices help you carry over a thought from one sentence to another, from one idea to another, or from one paragraph to another, with words or phrases. And finally, transitional devices link your sentences and paragraphs together smoothly so that there are no abrupt jumps or breaks between ideas.

There are several types of transitional devices, and each category leads your reader to make certain connections or assumptions about the areas you are connecting. Some lead your reader forward and imply the "building" of an idea or thought, while others make your reader compare ideas or draw conclusions from the preceding thoughts. We will now classify the most common transitional words and expressions according to the function they perform.

Part 5: Common Transitional Devices and Vocabulary

The asterisk (*) indicates where a direct object should be placed. Generally speaking, the other transitions must be followed by a complete sentence.

Giving an example or Introducing an idea:

as an illustration, by way of example, especially, for example, for instance, for one thing, including, in fact, in particular, in this case, in this situation, notably, on this occasion, particularly, specifically, such as, take the case of, to demonstrate, to illustrate, to illustrate

Adding another idea:

additionally, again, also, alternatively, and, and then, as well, as well as, besides, besides *, either (neither), equally important, furthermore, in addition, in addition to *, in another case, let alone *,

moreover, much less, not only * but also* as well, not to mention *, on the other hand, or, to say nothing of *, too, what is more

Referring to an idea:

as far as * is concerned, as for *, concerning *, considering *, on the subject of *, regarding *, speaking about *, the fact that, when we consider that, with regards to *

Referring to a similar idea:

by the same token, equally, in the same way, in a like manner, likewise, similarly

Identify or clarifying an idea:

I mean, in other words, namely, specifically, that is, that is to say, thus, to put it another way

To repeat an idea:

as has been noted, as I have noted, as I have said, in brief

Comparing ideas:

whereas, but, yet, on the other hand, however, nevertheless, on the other hand, on the contrary, by comparison, where, compared to, up against, balanced against, vis a vis, but, although, conversely, meanwhile, after all, in contrast, although this may be true, still, even though, in the same manner, similarly, likewise

Conflicting ideas and exceptions:

(and) yet, but, by way of contrast, conversely, despite *, however, in contrast, in spite of *, nevertheless, of course, once in a while, on the other hand, sometimes, still, though, when in fact, whereas, while

Emphasizing an idea:

above all, absolutely, always, besides, certainly, definitely, emphatically, eternally, even more, extremely, forever, in any case, in fact, indeed, more importantly, naturally, never, obviously, perennially, positively, surprisingly, undeniably, unquestionably, without a doubt, without reservation

Concession:

(and) still, (and) yet, admittedly, albeit, although, be that as it may, but even so, despite (this), even though, granted (this), however, in spite of (this), nevertheless, nonetheless, notwithstanding (this), on the other hand, regardless (of this), though

Dismissing an idea:

all the same, at any rate, either way, in any case, in any event, in either case, in either event, whatever happens, whichever happens

Replacement:

instead, (or) at least, (or) rather,

Explaining the cause of or reason for something:

as, because (of the fact), being that, due to (the fact that), for, for the (simple) reason that, in that, in view of (the fact), inasmuch as, owing to (the fact), seeing that, since

Condition:

as/so long as, even if, given that, granted (that), granting (that), if, in case, in the event (that), on (the) condition (that), only if, provided (that), providing (that), unless

Effect/Result:

as a consequence, as a result (of this), because (of this), consequently, for this reason, hence, in consequence, so, so much (so) that, so that, therefore, thus

Purpose:

for fear that, for the purpose of, in order that, in order to, in the hope that, lest, so, so as to, so that, to the end that, with this in mind, with this intention

Logical deduction:

accordingly, if not, if so, in that case, it follows that, otherwise, that being the case, then, under those circumstances

Numerical:

at first, first of all, for a start, in the (first, second, etc.) place, initially, secondly, to begin with, to start with

Putting ideas in a chronological or subordinating sequence:

A, *, B, *, C, *, after *, after a few hours, afterward, afterwards, and so forth, and then, as, next, and then, at this point, at this time, before *, concurrently, consequently, during, eventually, finally, first, *, second, *, third, *, following this, formerly, hence, immediately afterwards, immediately thereafter, later, meanwhile, next, now, previously, simultaneously, soon, subsequently, thereafter, then, therefore, thus, while, when

Conclusion:

as a final point, at last, eventually, evidently, finally, for these reasons, in any case, in conclusion, indeed, in fact, in the end, last but not least, lastly, obviously, to conclude (with)

Digression:

by the way, incidentally, to change to topic

Resuming a discussion:

anyhow, anyway, at any rate, to get back to the point, to resume, to return to the subject

Summation:

accordingly, all in all, altogether, as a result, as has been mentioned, as has been noted, as I have said, as I have shown, as was previously stated, briefly, consequently, given these points, hence, in a word, in brief, in conclusion, in other words, in short, in summation, in summary, on the whole, overall, so, then, therefore, thus, to be brief, to conclude, to make a long story short, to put it briefly, to sum it all up, to sum things up, to sum up, to summarize

Part 6: Examples of Transitions in Use

talking about the present time

1. **These days**, computers are available in most public schools and libraries.
2. **Nowadays**, women get heart attacks almost as often as men do.
3. **In this day and age**, technology is present in every facet of our life.
4. **Currently**, the economy is strong.
5. **At the present time**, the President is facing political difficulties.

talking about the historic past

6. **A long time ago**, there were no computers in schools.
7. **In former times**, people went to the river to get drinking water.
8. **Formerly**, slaves did much of the work in this country.
9. **In the old days**, kings and princes ruled people's lives.

giving additional examples and reasons

10. He's too weak to do heavy labor. **In addition**, his memory is failing him.
11. I think he's a boring teacher. **What's more**, he doesn't know his subject.
12. I don't have time to read Shakespeare. **Besides**, I don't understand him.
13. She's always late for work. **Besides this**, she loses important files.
14. The school doesn't have money for books. **Furthermore**, the building is old.
15. I am too busy to help you. **Moreover**, I think you can do it by yourself.
16. She's smart and beautiful. **On top of that**, she's kind and considerate.

giving the truth

17. I don't like little Ricky. **To tell the truth**, I think he's a monster.
18. He says he's a vegetarian. **In fact**, he eats seafood on occasion.
19. He calls himself a "professor." **Actually**, he's only a teaching assistant!

giving information which is against normal expectation

20. His liver was in bad shape. **That notwithstanding**, he continued to drink.
21. He loved her very much. **However**, he didn't ask her to marry him.
22. She hated him. **Even so**, she accepted all of his dinner invitations.
23. The boy got bad marks on all his exams. **All the same**, the teacher passed him.
24. I wasn't hungry. **Still**, I had dinner with the family and ate a lot.
25. I hated that job with a passion. **Nevertheless**, I stayed for ten years.
26. She spent hours in the hot kitchen. **Regardless**, he didn't touch her food.