Thesis Statements

A How-To
What a thesis statement is not

- It is NOT
  - A title
  - A statement of intent
  - A statement of fact
- These things are all important, but none can be developed into a thesis statement
  - A title isn’t descriptive enough to orient your readers
  - A statement of intent can reveal more, but is stylistically distracting
  - A statement of fact is a dead end (it’s not arguable)
**Example 1**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Hybrid Cars: Pro and Con</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Announcement of intent</strong></td>
<td>I will examine the pros and cons of hybrid cars that use both gasoline and electricity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Statement of fact</strong></td>
<td>Hybrid cars are more energy efficient than cars with standard gasoline engines</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Thesis statement</strong></td>
<td>Hybrid cars that use both gasoline and electricity would decrease our country’s dependence on foreign oil.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
# Example 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Orwell’s “A Hanging”</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Announcement of intent</td>
<td>This paper will discuss George Orwell’s attitude toward the death penalty in his essay “A Hanging.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Statement of fact</td>
<td>In his essay, Orwell describes a hanging that he witnessed in Burma.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thesis statement</td>
<td>In “A Hanging,” George Orwell shows that capital punishment is not only brutal but also immoral</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Deciding on a Thesis

- No rules determine when you formulate your thesis
  - Depends on scope of assignment
  - Your knowledge of the subject
  - Your personal method of writing
- You will learn new things as you write, so don’t consider your first thesis statement set in stone. In fact, your thesis statement probably should change in some way during the course of your writing.
Getting Started

• What sort of paper are you writing? This determines a great deal as to how you structure your thesis statement.
  • **Analytical paper**: breaks down an issue or an idea into its component parts, evaluates the issue or idea, and presents this breakdown and evaluation to the audience.
  • **Expository (explanatory) paper**: explains something to the audience.
  • **Argumentative paper** makes a claim about a topic and justifies this claim with specific evidence. The claim could be an opinion, a policy proposal, an evaluation, a cause-and-effect statement, or an interpretation. The goal of the argumentative paper is to convince the audience that the claim is true based on the evidence provided.

• If you are writing a text which does not fall under these three categories (ex. a narrative), a thesis statement somewhere in the first paragraph could still be helpful to your reader.
Analytical Paper

- Example of an analytical thesis statement:
  - An analysis of the college admission process reveals one challenge facing counselors: accepting students with high test scores or students with strong extracurricular backgrounds.

- The paper that follows should:
  - explain the analysis of the college admission process
  - explain the challenge facing admissions counselors
Expository Paper

- Example of an expository (explanatory) thesis statement:
  - The life of the typical college student is characterized by time spent studying, attending class, and socializing with peers.
- The paper that follows should:
  - explain how students spend their time studying, attending class, and socializing with peers
Argumentative Paper

- Example of an argumentative thesis statement:
  - High school graduates should be required to take a year off to pursue community service projects before entering college in order to increase their maturity and global awareness.

- The paper that follows should:
  - present an argument and give evidence to support the claim that students should pursue community projects before entering college
Effective Thesis Statements

• Three characteristics
  • Clearly expresses your essay’s main idea
  • Communicates your essay’s purpose
  • Clearly worded
Item 1: Clarity

- Does more than state your topic
- Indicates what you will say about your topic
- Signals how you will approach your material
- Example from the essay “Grant and Lee: A Study in Contrasts” by Bruce Catton follows
Clarity

- They [Grant and Lee] were two strong men, these oddly different generals, and they represented the strengths of two conflicting currents that, through them, had come into final collision.
  - This statement says that the essay will compare and contrast Grant and Lee.
  - Specifically, it says that Catton will present the two Civil War generals as symbols of two opposing historical currents.
  - A less developed thesis statement ("Grant and Lee were quite different from each other") would have just echoed the title of the essay.
Item 2: Communicates your essay’s purpose

- Can be expressive
  - Conveying a mood or impression

- Can be informative
  - Listing points you will discuss
  - Presenting an objective overview of the essay

- Can be persuasive
  - Taking a strong stand or outlining the position you will argue
More Examples

• Expressive
  • The city’s homeless families live in heartbreaking surroundings.

• Informative
  • The plight of the homeless has become so serious that it is a major priority for many city governments.

• Persuasive
  • The best way to address the problems of the homeless is to renovate abandoned city buildings to create suitable housing for homeless families.
Item 3: Clearly Worded

- Should be clearly worded and speak for itself.
  - “My thesis is…”
  - “The thesis of this paper is…”

- Straightforward and accurate indication of what follows

- Don’t mislead readers about the essay’s direction, emphasis, scope, content, or viewpoint

- Vague language, confusing abstractions, irrelevant details, and unnecessarily complex terminology
For example...

- If your paper is going to discuss just the **effects** of new immigration laws, your thesis statement should not emphasize the events that resulted in their passage.
  - **Bad thesis statement:**
    - New immigration laws have failed to stem the tide of illegal immigrants.
  - **Lack of focus**
  - **Good thesis statement:**
    - Because they do not take into account the economic causes of immigration, current immigration laws do little to decrease the number of illegal immigrants coming from Mexico into the United States.
  - Clearly indicates what the writer is going to discuss
  - Establishes a specific direction for the essay