

# Developing a Strong Thesis Statement<sup>1</sup>

## Midwestern Writer's Studio Handout

The thesis statement is the core of an academic paper – the claim you set out to prove. As such, it's a crucial piece of the writing process to get right. In this handout, we'll help you do that by looking at the answers to four commonly-asked questions: 1) What is a thesis statement? 2) What makes a thesis statement effective? 3) How do I get from a general paper topic to a specific thesis? 4) Where in the paper should I place my thesis statement?

Let's look at them one at a time.

### 1. What is a thesis statement?

A thesis statement is a specific, arguable claim that you set out to prove in your research paper. Everything in your paper – your supporting arguments, your evidence and research – should build a case for your thesis. Here's an example:

General paper topic: the book of Esther

Thesis statement (a specific, arguable claim about the book of Esther): Although God's name is never mentioned in the book of Esther, God's hand can be seen in the great number of "coincidences" throughout the story.

### 2. What makes a thesis statement effective?<sup>2</sup>

There are four criteria for an effective thesis statement:

- ✓ *A strong thesis statement takes a stand.*

Your claim is arguable. That means that not everyone will agree with you, because there is room for debate and/or differing interpretations of the evidence. However, you should be able to back up your claim with specific evidence and arguments.

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<sup>1</sup> Author: Jennifer Hearson. Adapted from English Composition I "Developing a Thesis Statement" notes, "Developing a Strong Thesis Statement for a Research Paper" handout, and "Developing a Strong Thesis Statement" Workshop, 9/26/19.

<sup>2</sup> The following guidelines adapted from Indiana University Bloomington, "How to Write a Thesis Statement," [http://www.indiana.edu/~wts/pamphlets/thesis\\_statement.shtml/](http://www.indiana.edu/~wts/pamphlets/thesis_statement.shtml/). Examples 1 and 3 from Steven Katz, "How to Tell a Strong Thesis Statement from a Weak One," [http://www.stevengkatz.com/Research\\_Project\\_files/Strong\\_Thesis.pdf](http://www.stevengkatz.com/Research_Project_files/Strong_Thesis.pdf).

**Weak thesis:** There were some economic and some political causes of the French Revolution.  
(The writer is playing it safe – this is general enough that there is no real claim to defend.)

**Stronger thesis:** Although the lack of competent national leadership contributed to the French Revolution, the most significant causes were economic.  
(The writer is taking a much clearer stand here – one which will need to be defended and supported with evidence.)

- ✓ *A strong thesis statement justifies discussion.*

Your claim is intriguing; it may contradict a commonly-held view or raise a question your reader hasn't considered before. The UNC Writing Center calls this the "So what?" test – does your claim pique a reader's interest? Will it spark conversation? Or will your audience lack the interest to read further?

**Weak thesis:** Solomon was a famous king of Israel.  
(This is fairly obvious – no discussion is really necessary. In addition, note that no clear claim is being made; this is more a statement of fact.)

**Stronger thesis:** In the eyes of the world, Solomon was a great and successful king – one whose fame and accomplishments would be celebrated for centuries to come. However, measured against God's parameters for monarchs in Deuteronomy 17, Solomon was an absolute failure as king.<sup>3</sup>

(Not only does this student take a clear stand, but this claim and its implications for godly leadership certainly spark interest and debate.)

- ✓ *A strong thesis statement is specific.*

A focused and specific claim is more interesting and much easier to support than one that is too broad or vague.

**Weak thesis:** World War II had many causes and effects.  
(This is extremely vague and is *far* too much to cover in a single paper.)

**Stronger thesis:** World War II was an important watershed for African American civil rights issues.

(This student has "zoomed in" on one particular effect of World War II and made a claim about it. Not only is this thesis much more interesting, but it will be much easier to research and defend.)

- ✓ *A strong thesis statement expresses one main idea.*

Again, this is a question of focus. Trying to support a complex or multi-part thesis statement is difficult and will most likely confuse and/or lose your reader.

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<sup>3</sup> Used as an example – with permission – from a former student (JA).

**Weak thesis statement:** Several elements of the biblical story of Joseph demonstrate God's sovereignty and also foreshadow the life and work of Christ.

(There are at least two separate claims here which will take the essay in two different directions.)

**Stronger thesis statement:** Several elements of the biblical story of Joseph demonstrate God's sovereignty.

(The student has chosen just one claim to focus on, which will make the paper significantly easier to research, organize, and write. The other claim can be set aside as an idea to explore in another paper on another day.)

Is it worth taking the time to develop a strong, clear thesis statement?

Absolutely. Not only will it make your final research paper much more effective, but it will make the researching and writing process easier if you have a narrow focus and a specific claim to prove.

### 3. How do I get from a general paper topic to a specific thesis?

- **Ask a question about the topic, and then look for an answer.**

Example: Jesus' claim to be the Good Shepherd (John 10): Was Jesus just using a metaphor that the people of His day would understand? Or is there a connection to Ezekiel 34 (in which God rebukes Israel's religious leaders as bad shepherds and states that He Himself will be "the Good Shepherd" of His people)? If there is a connection between the two passages, what are its theological implications?

That's an intriguing question! The answer you find (looking first at both biblical texts and their contexts and then at academic commentaries) would be your thesis statement.

- **Identify an issue related to the topic that sparks debate. Do some research, and then decide which position you support, based on the evidence you find.**

This approach works well with tough ethical questions, theological issues, or difficult passages that are debated among believers/evangelical scholars.

Example: Paul's description of his struggles in Romans 7:13-26: Is Paul describing his situation before he became a believer? Or is he describing his situation as a believer? Scholars disagree.

After looking at the passage and its context in detail, and then at academic commentaries representing both positions, decide which position the textual evidence seems to support more clearly. That will be your thesis.

➤ **Make sure that your thesis statement meets all four criteria.**

Once you have a tentative thesis statement, check it against the four criteria mentioned above. Does your thesis take a stand? Does it justify discussion? Is it specific? Does it deal with one main idea? Once you can confidently say that it meets all four, you should have a promising thesis statement in hand.

#### 4. Where in the paper should I place my thesis statement?

➤ The most common placement is at the **end of the introduction**.

This allows the introduction to draw readers in, give context on the issue under discussion, and present the thesis itself. The writer then goes on to make a case for the thesis with supporting arguments and evidence in the body of the paper.

➤ Occasionally, the thesis is placed in the **conclusion** of the paper instead.

In certain situations, a student may choose to open the paper with a question, go on to evaluate the evidence throughout the body of the paper, and build to a thesis in the conclusion. Note: While this structure can be very effective, it is more challenging to pull off successfully than the more traditional thesis-first structure above.

### Additional resources

<http://writingcenter.unc.edu/handouts/thesis-statements/>

UNC's Writing Center provides an insightful and clear discussion of what a thesis statement is, how to develop a working thesis, and how to refine it into a strong and specific thesis. Excellent examples are included as well.

<https://wts.indiana.edu/writing-guides/how-to-write-a-thesis-statement.html>

Indiana University Bloomington's writing help center gives specific guidelines for a strong thesis statement, and then provides examples of both weak and strong thesis statements.

Kibbe, Michael. *From Topic to Thesis: A Guide to Theological Research*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2016.

Using specific examples from his own academic career, Kibbe shows students how to get from a general paper topic to a specific research question and thesis statement. The book also includes great advice on what types of sources to use at each stage of the research process.