

Thesis Statements

Student Name: _____

Instructor: _____

Date: _____

Course: _____

About This DLA

Important Note

All the activities (5) in the DLA must be completed in their entirety before meeting with a tutor and receiving credit. Where indicated, complete your work on this sheet. If your instructor wants evidence of this completed DLA, return this form to him or her with the tutor's signature included.

Learning Outcome

Through a Power Point presentation, written activity, and tutoring session, this activity explains what a strong thesis statement is and will help you practice and develop thesis writing skills necessary for academic writing.

Activities (approximately 1 hour)

Read the information, complete the activities that follow, and be prepared to discuss your answers when you meet with a tutor.

Understanding Thesis Statements

The thesis statement of an essay is the one- or two- sentence statement(s) that expresses the main idea of the paper. Specifically, the thesis statement identifies the writer's topic and the opinion the writer has about that topic. Because the thesis statement lets readers know what to expect, it should appear early in the essay. Often the thesis appears as the last sentence in the introduction.

For example, an essay could have this thesis: *The current television rating system does little to help parents make wise programming choices for their children.*

This thesis statement presents both the essay's topic and the writer's opinion:

Topic: the current television rating system

Writer's opinion: It does little to help parents decide what children should watch.

Why is a thesis statement necessary?

The thesis statement performs two functions:

First, the *writer* creates a thesis to focus the essay's subject. If a writer cannot sum up the essay's main idea in one or two sentences, then she probably does not yet clearly grasp the topic. In this way, writing a thesis statement tests the writer's clarity of thought. Once the writer decides on the paper's main

focus, the thesis statement additionally serves as a guide to remind the writer to keep the essay focused and organized.

Second, the presence of a good thesis statement aids *reader* understanding. A hallmark of a well-organized essay is a thesis-support structure. That is, the thesis statement announces the essay's topic; then the body of the essay further explains and supports that topic. In other words, the thesis statement creates an expectation in the reader's mind about what will follow in the rest of the essay. When the body paragraphs fulfill this reader expectation, the paper feels well organized and the content makes sense. If the thesis statement is misleading, however, or missing altogether, the body of the paper can seem confusing or irrelevant because it is not viewed in relation to the paper's overall topic (the thesis). Thus, the thesis statement is important because it answers the reader's question, "Why are you telling me this?"

Strategy

Because the thesis statement is so important, the writer must shape it carefully, and that means approaching the first draft with a preliminary thesis statement in mind. A preliminary thesis statement is an early version of the thesis statement; it is the version used to guide the first draft, to help focus and organize it. The preliminary thesis statement states the essay's topic and the writer's opinion of the topic, but it does so in an early, rough form. Like everything else in a first draft, the preliminary thesis statement is subject to change—that is why it is called "preliminary." In fact, this thesis statement is so preliminary that it may bear little or no resemblance to the thesis statement in the final version of the essay because, in the course of drafting and revising, the writer may decide to shift focus or change topics dramatically. Because writing is an ongoing act of discovery and revision, such changes are common and not a source of concern. Once the writer has chosen a writing topic, established a purpose, identified the audience, and discovered ideas for developing the topic, it is time to shape the preliminary thesis. When doing so, consider the following qualities of an effective thesis statement:

1. **A good thesis statement clearly suggests an essay's direction, emphasis, and scope.** A thesis statement should not make promises that the essay will not fulfill. It should suggest how ideas are related and where the emphasis will lie.
2. **A good thesis statement is neither too broad nor too narrow.** The thesis determines the scope of an essay. If a thesis is too broad, the essay will be superficial. On the other hand, if a thesis is too narrow, the essay will have nowhere to go. Of course, making the thesis statement just right depends on the specifics of the assignment being addressed, but here's a rough example of how narrow a thesis statement should be.

Too Broad: Everybody has bad days sometimes.

Too Narrow: I had a bad day yesterday.

Just Right: Every time I have a bad day, I learn something about myself.

3. **A good thesis statement usually argues a point of view.** Remember, an effective thesis statement should state the writer's opinion about a given topic. Thus in college writing, thesis statements are almost always argumentative. Whether the thesis argues one side of a social debate or merely argues for a certain interpretation of a piece of literature, the thesis almost always presents some viewpoint that can be questioned or challenged by the reader. It should not merely announce the

paper's subject or make a factual statement about a topic. To test whether a thesis is argumentative, ask whether a person could argue against it. If the statement can be argued against, the thesis is argumentative. If it cannot be argued against then it is probably factual and lacks the writer's opinion.

Not Argumentative (announcement of paper's subject): I want to share some thoughts with you about our space program.

Not Argumentative (statement of fact): The United States space program grew extensively during the Cold War.

Argumentative: Investing money in our space program is a misuse of taxpayers' dollars.

4. **A good thesis statement is concise.** Because the thesis statement's purpose is to make the paper topic clear, the sentence itself should be clear and concise, only giving the most relevant information.
5. **A good thesis statement is specific, not vague.** Make sure the thesis statement contains specific language.
Too Vague: Hemingway's war stories are really good.
More Specific: Hemingway's war stories helped to create a new prose style.
6. **A good thesis statement is strong.** The thesis statement should be as strong as possible. This means avoiding weak phrasing such as "in my opinion," "I believe," "I think," and "it seems to me." Since you, the writer wrote the paper, it is obvious that the content of the paper is your opinion; you don't need to tell your reader.

"They Say/I Say:" A Model for Developing Arguments and Thesis Statements

One of the things students often don't know is that academic writing values a model of communication where one considers alternative voices and viewpoints. In fact, academic writing is usually a reaction to other points of view and it presents those points of view even as it responds to them. Here, for example, are early and improved drafts of a thesis that incorporates the perspectives of both the writer and of those to whom the writer is responding:

Rough Draft:

They say, "Wal-Mart is the root of all corporate evil." **I say** that Wal-Mart provides good products cheaply to enhance the lives of American consumers.

Improved Version:

Wal-Mart critics argue that the company is a greedy mega-corporation, but a fairer view recognizes that Wal-Mart is an essential and helpful leader in the American consumer marketplace.

In the improved version, the "they say" has become more specific, "Wal-Mart critics," while the "I say" has been replaced with the phrase "a fairer view recognizes."

*Notice that what **they** say comes before what **I** say since what I am saying is in response to them. Also, you can see that this **they say/I say** model gives a clear sense of what the body of the essay will be about.*

Clearly, the essay will need to spend some time summarizing the position of Wal-Mart critics before going into its main argument which refutes them.

This **"They Say/I say"** approach is most helpful for persuasive papers and argumentative research papers (papers where you are asked to take a position rather than just summarize what experts say about something).

As you construct different arguments, the basic template of **"They say/I say"** can be modified literally hundreds of ways. *Please note that you do not need to fill in any of the templates—these are examples only.* Any formulation is fair game so long as it maintains the model of presenting different voices in a written discussion and making clear the distinction between these voices and yours:

- Author X contradicts herself. At the same time that she argues _____, she also implies _____.
- Author Y argues _____, and I agree because _____.
- Author Z's argument that _____ is supported by new research showing that _____.
- He claims that _____, but I have mixed feelings about it. On the one hand, I agree that _____.

So long as your template presents two or more voices, you can feel free to experiment with some of your own. Notice in the last example how you can use the template to both agree and disagree with another while still being clear and taking a firm stand. The next time you are writing a persuasive paper (or an academic research paper), try to use one of these templates to help you organize and clarify your position. You will find it can take a lot of the guesswork out of writing your paper. A Writing Center tutor can also help you adopt your particular assignment to an appropriate template.

What about "I"?

Many students wonder whether they should use the pronoun "I" (that is, the first person) or not. This can vary from instructor to instructor and your best bet is to check with the professor. However, you will want to know that there are many ways to state your own opinion without actually using the pronoun "I." Here are some examples:

- X is right that the US economy is transferring more and more of its wealth to the upper class.
- The evidence shows that _____.
- Y's assertion that the new health care plan is a "government takeover of health care" is at odds with the key provisions of the new legislation.
- Anyone familiar with the traffic problems of LA should agree that _____.

All of these templates—and many more—allow you to make a clear statement of your point of view without using "I." Even if your professor allows the use of the first person, it's a good idea to use a mix of these templates and the first person to avoid the monotony of repeating over and over "I think," "I believe," etc.

The information regarding "They Say/I Say" was borrowed, adapted, and greatly condensed from *They Say, I Say: the Moves that Matter in Academic Writing* by Gerald Graff and Cathy Birkenstein, W. W. Norton, 2010. This is an excellent textbook for anyone writing at the college level in any course and the Writing Center heartily recommends it.

Activities

Check off each box once you have completed the activity.

☐ 1. *Thesis PowerPoint*

Go to <http://www.mtsac.edu/writingcenter> for [Mt. SAC's Writing Center website](#). At the top, select the link for DLAs. Scroll down and select and watch the [Thesis Statement PowerPoint presentation](#).

☐ 2. *Thesis Statement Review*

What are the six elements of a "good" thesis statement according to the information above?

1. _____	4. _____
2. _____	5. _____
3. _____	6. _____

☐ 3. *Thesis with Opinion*

Again, review the above information. Then for two of the general subjects below, compose basic thesis statements that assert your opinion only. Write something resembling the following:

- **Example:** General education requirements should be abolished.
- **Example:** Online classes help working students complete college faster.

Rising tuition

E-books

Bilingual education

College athletes

Online classes

Immigration and education

1. _____

2. _____

☐ 4. *Thesis with "Because" Added*

Revise the two thesis statements from above by adding a "because" clause to each. Here are some examples (the "because" clauses are in **bold**):

- **Example:** General education requirements should be abolished **because they are too widely varied.**
- **Example:** Online classes help working students complete college faster **because they can work on classwork anytime of the day.**

1. _____

 2.

☐ 5. Thesis with “They Say/I Say”

Review the “They Say/I Say” section above. Revise your thesis statements from the previous exercise above, adding the opposing position. Remember to include all the features of the original. Here are some examples (the opposing position is in **bold**):

- **Example: Although general education requirements are meant to give students a well-rounded education,** they should be abolished because they are too widely varied.
- **Example: Even though some professors argue that online classes do not offer the same rigor and experience as traditional courses,** *online classes help working students* complete college faster because they can work on classwork anytime of the day.

 1.

 2.

☐ 6. Review the DLA

Go to <https://mtsac2.mywconline.com> and use the [Mt. SAC Writing Center Appointment System](#) to make a DLA appointment, or sign-up to see a tutor on the “**DLA Walk-in**” list in the Writing Center. Discuss with a tutor the ways in which essays should develop based on the thesis statements you’ve composed. (Hint: Think of how you would outline these essays based on the thesis statements you wrote.) Demonstrate your understanding of thesis statements in your discussion with the tutor. For example, the “opposite” thesis statement creates counterarguments and supporting reasons that a writer would need to anticipate and address through the course of a position argument.

 Student’s Signature:

 Date:

 Tutor’s Signature

 Date:

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