# Thesis Statements

You’ve heard it a million times: “Your paper must have a *thesis.*” But what does this mean exactly? In fact, professors may say “thesis” but mean different things. As a student, you need to figure out exactly what your professor means.

A *thesis*, as you’ve no doubt heard before, is the *main claim* of your paper, *the point that the paper argues or proves*. It is different from *the topic sentence of the paper,* which is essentially the author’s *statement of intent.*

Here’s where things get tricky. Some professors say, “Your *thesis* should be at the end of your introduction,” when they really mean to say “The *topic sentence* for the paper—your statement of intent—should be at the end of your introduction.” Here are some famous topic sentences:

* “But since I feel that you are men of genuine good will and your criticisms are sincerely set forth, I would like to answer your statement in what I hope will be patient and reasonable terms.” Martin Luther King, “Letter from Birmingham Jail”
* “But one does not like to leave so remarkable a letter as yours—a letter perhaps unique in the history of human correspondence, since when before has an educated man asked a woman how in her opinion war can be prevented?—unanswered. Therefore let us make the attempt; even if it is doomed to failure.” Virginia Woolf, *Three Guineas*

These statements appear at the end of the introduction of each of these letters. Neither one states the writer’s main point. Instead, they indicate a plan of action—what the writer plans to do. Only upon getting to the end of each letter can we fully understand its main point.

THE WAY THINGS ARE: Every paper needs a thesis. Some professors will ask for a thesis statement at the end of an introduction, and they will indeed mean “I want you to state *your main point* at the end of the introduction.” Others ask for the same thing but will mean “At the end of the introduction I want to see *a sentence that tells me what you plan to do* in this paper. The statement of your main point can come later. ” Which option do your professors prefer? When in doubt, ask them!

**Characteristics of a Thesis:**

Regardless of its placement in your paper, a thesis should be:

* **Contestable:** Your thesis should make an assertion or contestable claim with which a reasonable person might disagree. In other words, your thesis should introduce your reader to an idea or argument that needs proving, rather than a statement that your reader is likely to agree with.
* **Appropriate:** Your thesis should respond to the questions and goals of the assignment and tell how ways your paper will address them. If you are asked to select a specific text, topic, etc., your thesis should make clear not only what your paper will focus on, but also what it will argue about that focus.
* **Focused:** Your thesis should account for the scope of your argument—it should let your reader know what will be addressed in the paper (if the thesis doesn’t appear until the end of the paper, this job can be done by the thesis question or contract). Your thesis should provide a specific enough argument that it can be addressed in the length of your paper. In other words, your thesis shouldn’t promise to explain all the causes of World War I in five pages. Instead, it might examine one specific cause and explain why it is significant.
* **Identifiable:** It can take up more than a sentence, but a reader needs to be able to recognize it.

**Drafting a Thesis**

Coming up with a thesis for your paper may require stages: an initial draft, revision, and checking the thesis against what you’ve actually written to make sure it is complete.

Jot answers to these questions:

*What will my paper prove? Why are my observations and analyses significant?*

*How does my argument introduce your reader to something new or unexpected?*

*Why should my reader be interested in this argument?*

Try framing your thesis into a tried-and-true pattern:

*"At first glance X might look like Y, but when you look more closely you see that it actually looks like Z."*

*"They say X, but I say Y."*

Once you have drafted a tentative thesis that not only tells your reader what your paper will be about, but also explains what you think you will argue or prove, it’s time to draft the body of your paper. Once you have a complete draft, you can return to your thesis and make sure it reflects the argument well.

**Revising and Sharpening**

Make a reverse outline of what you have written. Then consider the following questions.

• What are the main components of my argument? What is the main idea of each paragraph?

• What are the individual claims the paper makes? How do the different ideas in the paper relate to one another?

• How is the paper organized? Why is it organized in that way?

• Why is the paper significant? What does it show or prove to my reader?

Once you’ve answered these questions, look back at your tentative thesis. Is it clear how that thesis relates to each individual paragraph and the claims you make? Is the scope of your thesis the same as that of your paper? If the thesis is at the beginning, does it reflect how the paper is organized? Revise with your answers in mind.

## Thesis checklist

• Does my thesis (regardless of where it appears) identify a specific focus? Does that focus correspond to what I cover in the body paragraphs?

• Does my thesis cover an appropriate scope for the length of my paper?

• Does my thesis tell my reader what my paper argues, demonstrates, or proves?

• Does my thesis do more than summarize my topic? Does it tell my reader something new or unexpected?

• Does my thesis give my reader a preview of the paper’s organization? Or, if the thesis is delayed, is there a topic sentence in the introduction that tells readers what to expect the paper to cover?

**Sample Thesis Statements from Different Disciplines**

• History: A careful review of both official documents and private accounts reveals that the chief actors in the execution of Louis XVI were not only aware of the English precedent, but referred to it in the process of choosing their own courses of action.

• Social science: This research shows that language development in deaf children is similar to language in hearing children, although large individual differences exist among the deaf population.

• Biology: Together, these results show that Lm exploits intrinsic tissue heterogeneity to access its receptor and reveal transcytosis as a novel and unanticipated pathway that is hijacked by Lm to breach the intestinal epithelium and cause systemic infection.

• Literature and film: The women in *Ordinary People* are consistently seen and shown from a male perspective in which they function mainly to devastate and disrupt the already shaky state of the film’s protagonist, Conrad Jarrett.

Source: Roberts-Miller, Trish. *It’s Just a Feather: The Craft of Scholarly Writing* (draft)