

The Thesis Statement

Introduction

The thesis statement is one or two sentences which express the point and purpose of your paper. The thesis tells your readers where you're going to take them and better establishes how your paper will be developed and organized. The thesis is like the answer to a question explored in your paper.

To develop a thesis, start with a topic that interests you, or one that has been assigned to you (unfortunately, we can't always choose our subject matter). The next step is to decide upon what question needs to be answered by your paper. For papers with specific assignments, the professor's guidelines will lead you right to your thesis. Use our handout on Analyzing Assignments to help you.

When choosing your own topic, your thesis development will most likely begin with a broad idea. Perhaps you need to write an Anthropology paper for a class focused on indigenous peoples of the southwestern United States. You know you would like to write something on gender issues and female life. Your thesis begins as:

Gender issues and female life...

You begin to research and to think about your topic, realizing that certain female puberty rituals that take place within New Mexican cultures fascinate you. These rituals are central in the lives of the cultures, great occasions for celebrating and honoring the women of the group. Your thesis now becomes:

Female puberty rituals in New Mexican Indigenous cultures...

You keep researching and thinking. You realize a fascinating connection. These cultures which celebrate female life have elaborate creation myths which credit women with beginning civilization. Now your thesis is more specific.

Female puberty rituals in New Mexican Indigenous cultures have to do with creation myths involving women.

For a rather long paper, this thesis might be adequately specific. Now you must make sure the thesis answers the question "so what?" Your audience needs to know why your subject is important.

The creation myths of indigenous cultures of New Mexico credit women as the mothers of the universe, influencing the belief in the female puberty ritual as the central rite of the culture.

Notice how this thesis statement has become more specific through the process. When you started thinking about your paper, you may not have realized you would write about this topic, but as you thought and researched, your ideas became more specific. Your ideas may also change while you write the paper. A thesis statement can always be revised as you progress through your paper.

Thesis Checklist

The following list explains how you can tell if your thesis is right for your paper.

A good thesis...

1. ***Expresses one main idea.***

If your subject has more than one main point, your paper may be confusing to your reader. If you are too ambitious with your subject, you won't have time to adequately develop it. A thesis that clearly expresses one main point will focus your paper. Think of it as an umbrella by which everything in your paper should be covered.

2. ***Takes a stand and justifies discussion on a topic.***

The question "so what" should always be answered by your thesis. Your thesis should show that you have analyzed a subject and come to conclusions. Your thesis should be such that people could disagree with you. Otherwise, why write about it?

3. ***Concerns an appropriately specific subject.***

If your thesis is too broad you won't develop your paper well enough. It will feel inadequate. If your thesis is too specific then you will have too little to write about. The appropriate specificity depends on your paper length. It should be able to be thoroughly discussed in the given length and not feel lacking.

4. ***Remains flexible.***

It is important to remember that your thesis can and should change with your writing process. At the beginning of writing a paper, you will not know where your writing and research will take you. Allow your paper room to evolve how it wants to and how you want it to.