Writing a Thesis Statement

A thesis statement is a sentence that expresses the main ideas of your essay and answers the research question posed by your extended essay. It offers the examiner an immediate and simple way to follow what the essay will be discussing and what you as a writer are setting out to tell them.

**General Thesis Statement Tips**

- A thesis statement generally consists of two parts: your topic, and then the analysis, explanation(s), or assertion(s) that you're making about the topic. The kind of thesis statement you write will depend on what kind of extended essay you're writing.
- A thesis statement is an extremely specific statement -- it should cover only what you want to discuss in your extended essay, and be supported with specific evidence. The scope of your paper will be determined by your topic and the 4000 word maximum length of the extended essay.
- Generally, a thesis statement appears at the end of the first paragraph of an essay, so that readers will have a clear idea of what to expect as they read.
- You can think of your thesis as a map or a guide both for yourself and your audience.
- As you write and revise your paper, it is acceptable to change your thesis statement -- sometimes you do not discover what you really intended to say about our topic until you have started to write. Ensure that your 'final' thesis statement accurately shows what will be covered in your paper.

**Argumentative Thesis Statements**

In an argumentative paper, you are making a claim about a topic and justifying this claim with reasons and evidence. This claim could be an opinion, a policy proposal, an evaluation, a cause-and-effect statement, or an interpretation. However, this claim must be a statement that people could possibly disagree with, because the goal of your paper is to convince your audience that your claim is true based on your presentation of your reasons and evidence. An argumentative thesis statement will tell your audience:

- your claim or assertion
- the reasons/evidence that support this claim
- the order in which you will be presenting your reasons and evidence

Example: Barn owls' nests should not be eliminated from barns because barn owls help farmers by eliminating insect and rodent pests.

A reader who encountered this thesis would expect to be presented with an argument and evidence that farmers should not get rid of barn owls when they find them nesting in their barns.

Questions to ask yourself when writing an argumentative thesis statement:

- What is my claim or assertion?
- What are the reasons I have to support my claim or assertion?
- In what order should I present my reasons?
Analytical Thesis Statements

In an analytical paper, you are breaking down an issue or an idea into its component parts, evaluating the issue or idea, and presenting this breakdown and evaluation to your audience. An analytical thesis statement will explain:

• what you are analyzing
• the parts of your analysis
• the order in which you will be presenting your analysis

Example: An analysis of barn owl flight behaviour reveals two kinds of flight patterns: patterns related to hunting prey and patterns related to courtship.

A reader who encountered that thesis in a paper would expect an explanation of the analysis of barn owl flight behaviour, and then an explanation of the two kinds of flight patterns.

Questions to ask yourself when writing an analytical thesis statement:

• What did I analyze?
• What did I discover in my analysis?
• How can I categorize my discoveries?
• In what order should I present my discoveries?

Expository (Explanatory) Thesis Statements

In an expository paper, you are explaining something to your audience. An expository thesis statement will tell your audience:

• what you are going to explain to them
• the categories you are using to organize your explanation
• the order in which you will be presenting your categories

Example: The lifestyles of barn owls include hunting for insects and animals, building nests, and raising their young.

A reader who encountered that thesis would expect the paper to explain how barn owls hunt for insects, build nests, and raise young.

Questions to ask yourself when writing an expository thesis statement:

• What am I trying to explain?
• How can I categorize my explanation into different parts?
• In what order should I present the different parts of my explanation?
How do I know if my thesis is strong?

Even if you do not have time to get advice elsewhere, you can do some thesis evaluation of your own. When reviewing your first draft and its working thesis, ask yourself the following:

- **Do I answer the question?** Re-reading the question prompt after constructing a working thesis can help you fix an argument that misses the focus of the question.
- **Have I taken a position that others might challenge or oppose?** If your thesis simply states facts that no one would, or even could, disagree with, it's possible that you are simply providing a summary, rather than making an argument.
- **Is my thesis statement specific enough?** Thesis statements that are too vague often do not have a strong argument. If your thesis contains words like "good" or "successful," see if you could be more specific: why is something "good"; what specifically makes something "successful"?
- **Does my thesis pass the "So what?" test?** If a reader's first response is, "So what?" then you need to clarify, to forge a relationship, or to connect to a larger issue.
- **Does my essay support my thesis specifically and without wandering?** If your thesis and the body of your essay do not seem to go together, one of them has to change. It's o.k. to change your working thesis to reflect things you have figured out in the course of writing your paper. Remember, always reassess and revise your writing as necessary.
- **Does my thesis pass the "how and why?" test?** If a reader's first response is "how?" or "why?" your thesis may be too open-ended and lack guidance for the reader. See what you can add to give the reader a better take on your position right from the beginning.

**Examples**

Suppose you are taking a course on 19th-century America, and the instructor hands out the following essay assignment: Compare and contrast the reasons why the North and South fought the Civil War. You turn on the computer and type out the following:

*The North and South fought the Civil War for many reasons, some of which were the same and some different.*

This weak thesis restates the question without providing any additional information. You will expand on this new information in the body of the essay, but it is important that the reader know where you are heading. A reader of this weak thesis might think, "What reasons? How are they the same? How are they different?" Ask yourself these same questions and begin to compare Northern and Southern attitudes (perhaps you first think, "The South believed slavery was right, and the North thought slavery was wrong"). Now, push your comparison toward an interpretation—why did one side think slavery was right and the other side think it was wrong? You look again at the evidence, and you decide that you are going to argue that the North believed slavery was immoral while the South believed it upheld the Southern way of life. You write:

*While both sides fought the Civil War over the issue of slavery, the North fought for moral reasons while the South fought to preserve its own institutions.*
Now you have a working thesis! Included in this working thesis is a reason for the war and some idea of how the two sides disagreed over this reason. As you write the essay, you will probably begin to characterize these differences more precisely, and your working thesis may start to seem too vague. Maybe you decide that both sides fought for moral reasons, and that they just focused on different moral issues. You end up revising the working thesis into a final thesis that really captures the argument in your paper:

*While both Northerners and Southerners believed they fought against tyranny and oppression, Northerners focused on the oppression of slaves while Southerners defended their own right to self-government.*

Compare this to the original weak thesis. This final thesis presents a way of interpreting evidence that illuminates the significance of the question. *Keep in mind that this is one of many possible interpretations of the Civil War—it is not the one and only right answer to the question.* There isn't one right answer; there are only strong and weak thesis statements and strong and weak uses of evidence.

Let's look at another example. Suppose your literature professor hands out the following assignment in a class on the American novel: Write an analysis of some aspect of Mark Twain's novel Huckleberry Finn. "This will be easy," you think. "I loved Huckleberry Finn!" You grab a pad of paper and write:

*Mark Twain's Huckleberry Finn is a great American novel.*

Why is this thesis weak? Think about what the reader would expect from the essay that follows: you will most likely provide a general, appreciative summary of Twain's novel. The question did not ask you to summarize; it asked you to analyze. Your professor is probably not interested in your opinion of the novel; instead, she wants you to think about *why* it's such a great novel—what do Huck's adventures tell us about life, about America, about coming of age, about race relations, etc.? First, the question asks you to pick an aspect of the novel that you think is important to its structure or meaning—for example, the role of storytelling, the contrasting scenes between the shore and the river, or the relationships between adults and children. Now you write:

*In Huckleberry Finn, Mark Twain develops a contrast between life on the river and life on the shore.*

Here's a working thesis with potential: you have highlighted an important aspect of the novel for investigation; however, it's still not clear what your analysis will reveal. Your reader is intrigued, but is still thinking, "So what? What's the point of this contrast? What does it signify?" Perhaps you are not sure yet, either. That's fine—begin to work on comparing scenes from the book and see what you discover. Free write, make lists, jot down Huck's actions and reactions. Eventually you will be able to clarify for yourself, and then for the reader, why this contrast matters. After examining the evidence and considering your own insights, you write:

*Through its contrasting river and shore scenes, Twain's Huckleberry Finn suggests that to find the true expression of American democratic ideals, one must leave "civilized" society and go back to nature.*

This final thesis statement presents an interpretation of a literary work based on an analysis of its content. Of course, for the essay itself to be successful, you must now present evidence from the novel that will convince the reader of your interpretation.