

Thesis Statements



Providing your audience with an idea of the purpose, scope, and organization of your writing is essential to most forms of writing. A thesis statement is the tool many writers and genres use to do just that. The more you learn about the definition and development of thesis statements, the stronger your theses will become, and the more your subsequent skills of organization, technique, and style will improve. While this handout offers basic principles for writing a thesis statement, always tailor your work to the assignment and audience you are addressing.

Definition

While a thesis statement can vary depending on the assignment and audience, it typically conveys some essential information to readers:

- A thesis provides the **purpose and main idea** of your writing.
- A thesis shows the **scope** of a piece of writing, the limits of what material your work will cover.
- A thesis indicates the **organization** of your writing by providing a preview and possible outline of what information will be covered in the body of your text. It helps readers understand what to look for as they read, and it can help keep you from digressing as you write.
- A thesis gives the writing **energy**, a sense of forward motion, which captivates your readers and leads them through each paragraph to the conclusion.

One of the best ways to learn the function of a thesis is to see it in practice. Consider reading an essay collection, a newspaper editorial, or a sample of writing from your discipline—anything with short, persuasive writing. Ask yourself what the author’s thesis is and how it manifests itself in the work. Think about how the work would function *without* a thesis. Assess what makes the thesis strong or weak.

Development

Thesis statements vary in form since, depending on the genre, complexity, and depth of the assignment, you might have to provide not just evidence for an argument, but context, counterarguments, and solutions. However, strong thesis statements make a claim, use clear and precise language, and convey a conscious, open-minded tone.

Making a Claim

Your job in researching a topic is to compile **observations**, which are deductive statements about the facts that you discover. You may conclude something like “Julius Caesar was a tyrant.” While this opinion is useful in beginning your writing, it’s difficult to sustain strong academic writing on such a one-dimensional idea. A strong thesis combines observations with **perspective**. As you collect your observations, ask yourself what factors might have caused the conditions of your observation or what implications your observation might lead to. You might suggest something like “Julius Caesar’s experience in the military cultured his tyrannical behavior.” A perspective like this adds **dimension** to your writing, which will ultimately make it more reasonable and engaging.

Clarity & Precision

Vagueness and breadth leave readers feeling confused and disoriented. If you carefully choose clear, precise words, you can help your readers understand your ideas. Consider the significance of the thesis on the following page:

Julius Caesar had an important influence on history.

This concept of this thesis is obstructed by several **generic** words: “important,” “influence,” and “history.” “Important influence” could refer to how Caesar became a dictator and brought about a civil war, but it could just as likely describe how he solidified the Roman Republic, laying the groundwork for Rome to rise as an empire.

Strong theses, instead, employ **concrete** words, which reference **explicit** ideas. Words like “Julius Caesar,” “aggressive,” “establishment,” and “dictator” are specific enough keep your reader from getting confused.

With more concrete words, a thesis might look something like this:

Julius Caesar’s aggressive leadership at the Battle of Alesia led to his establishment as a dictator.

If you find yourself struggling with a vague thesis, try thinking through these questions:

- *Which words in my thesis could a reader misinterpret?* **Circle the words** in your thesis that could be generic, and think of what concrete words you could use to replace them. You could also ask a friend to read your thesis and then explain it back to you in their own words. If their version is different from yours, your thesis may have some lurking generic words.
- *What sub-topics does my thesis contain?* Julius Caesar’s history has a myriad of subtopics: the Gallic Wars, Cleopatra, the Roman Senate, the Roman Civil Wars, his assassination, etc. Consider **zooming in** on a small part of your topic, confining your claim to only the scope of one subtopic.
- *Which part of my thesis is generic?* Sometimes, a thesis with concrete words still comes off as vague. “Julius Caesar permanently changed the political structure of the Roman Republic” has several concrete words, but its thesis is nevertheless abstract. Be sure to use not just concrete words, but **concrete ideas**.

Attitude & Perspective

Few things can alienate readers more than the tone of your writing. Readers are quick to recognize moments when a writer is being combative or ignorant. Consider the tone of the thesis below:

Brutus should not have betrayed Caesar because all Roman citizens respected him.

Notice the questions that this thesis seems to ignore: Did *every* Roman citizen really respect Caesar? And if so, is that enough of a reason not to overthrow a dictator? Why should the writer get to decide what Brutus *should* have done? Clearly, the author of this thesis has not thought through every implication of its claim. Biased writing, like the thesis above, can deter people from agreeing with your thesis.

Try to think of your thesis from an unbiased perspective. Have you considered *all* the implications of your argument? What would someone who disagrees with you have to say? Strong theses do not ignore their counterarguments, but confront them openly. They **inspire** opposing points of discussion, rather than put them down.

Think of your thesis like part of a conversation among several different people. Your contribution to the conversation is not the absolute word that ends the conversation, but the personal spin *you* offer, one which offers a unique **insight** to the topic, and which hopefully ignites future discussion.

Developing these advanced strategies might seem overwhelming, but practicing them as much as you can will improve your writing in the long run. If you ever need help, come talk to a Writing Center tutor.