**Thesis Statement**

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**Definition:**

A [sentence](http://grammar.about.com/od/rs/g/senterm.htm) in an [essay](http://grammar.about.com/od/e/g/essayterm.htm), [report](http://grammar.about.com/od/rs/g/reporterm.htm), [research paper](http://grammar.about.com/od/rs/g/Research-Paper.htm), or [speech](http://grammar.about.com/od/rs/g/speechterm.htm) that identifies the main idea and/or central [purpose](http://grammar.about.com/od/pq/g/purpose-term.htm) of the text.

The thesis statement serves as the organizing principle of the text and usually appears in the [introductory paragraph](http://grammar.about.com/od/il/g/Introductory-Paragraph.htm), often at the end.

See also:

* [**Thesis**](http://grammar.about.com/od/tz/g/thesis.htm)
* [Exercise in Identifying Effective Thesis Statements](http://grammar.about.com/od/tests/a/Exercise-In-Identifying-Effective-Thesis-Statements.htm)
* [Five-Paragraph Essay](http://grammar.about.com/od/fh/g/Five-Paragraph-Essay.htm)
* [Organization](http://grammar.about.com/od/mo/g/organizaterm.htm)
* [Proposition](http://grammar.about.com/od/pq/g/Proposition.htm)
* [Theme](http://grammar.about.com/od/tz/g/themeterm.htm)
* [The Thesis Sentence: Why Is It So Important?](http://homeworktips.about.com/od/thesissentence/a/fuss.htm?nl=1) (Grace Fleming, Homework/Study Tips)
* [Topic Sentence](http://grammar.about.com/od/tz/g/topicsenterm.htm)

**Examples and Guidelines:**

* "The reason for placing a **thesis** in the first paragraph of an essay or as soon after it as possible is that the sooner you state it the more likely you are to remain aware of your main idea and the less likely you are to wander from that idea as you write."  
  (Morton A. Miller, *Reading and Writing Short Essays*. Random House, 1980)
* **The Purpose of the Thesis Statement**  
  "[T]he purpose of the thesis is to give order both to the reader and to the writer. It does this by clearly stating the central [claim](http://grammar.about.com/od/c/g/claimterm.htm) that a piece of writing will try to [prove](http://grammar.about.com/od/pq/g/proofterm.htm). The writer takes care in the **thesis statement** to articulate a paper's [argument](http://grammar.about.com/od/ab/g/argmterm.htm) as precisely as possible, and this precision clarifies and focuses the direction of the paper. Most of the time, a writer must work with a dynamic thesis statement--one that changes and evolves during the [writing process](http://grammar.about.com/od/tz/g/writingprocessterm.htm). In other words, a working thesis statement that articulates what a writer is interested in exploring will be enough to guide a writer through a [draft](http://grammar.about.com/od/d/g/draftterm.htm) of the essay, but the *exact words for the thesis statement are not finalized until the paper is nearly complete*."  
  (Kathleen Muller Moore and Susie Lan Cassel, *Techniques for College Writing: The Thesis Statement and Beyond*. Wadsworth, Cengage, 2011)

* **Examples of Strong and Weak Thesis Statements**  
  "A strong **thesis statement** both names the topic and reveals the writer's opinion about that topic. It should be [clear](http://grammar.about.com/od/c/g/clarityterm.htm) and [specific](http://grammar.about.com/od/rs/g/Specificity.htm). A thesis statement can also list the supporting ideas, but sometimes these are written in a separate sentence.  
    
  "Look at these examples of a weak and a strong thesis statement.  
    
  *Weak thesis statement:*

India has a lot of interesting festivals.

The statement is too broad--the writer can't discuss all Indian festivals. Even though it does state the writer's opinion, the statement is not clear: it doesn't explain why the festivals are interesting.  
  
*Strong thesis statement:*

Diwali is an important festival for Indians because they celebrate, remember traditional legends, and enjoy time with their families.

The topic is specific enough, and it clearly gives the writer's opinion. In addition, it lists the supporting ideas."  
(Dorothy Zemach and Lynn Stafford-Yilmaz, *Writers at Work: The Essay*. Cambridge University Press, 2008)

* **Characteristics of an Effective Thesis Statement**  
  "An effective **thesis statement** suggests your essay's direction, emphasis, and scope. Your thesis should not make promises that your essay will not fulfill. It should suggest where you will place your emphasis and indicate in what order your major points will be discussed, as the following statement does.

***Effective Thesis Statement***  
Widely ridiculed as escape reading, romance novels are important as a proving ground for many never-before-published writers and, more significantly, as a showcase for strong heroines.

This thesis statement is effective because it tells readers that the essay to follow will focus on two major roles of the romance novel: providing markets for new writers and (more important) presenting strong female characters."  
(Laurie G. Kirszner and Stephen R. Mandell, *The Brief Wadsworth Handbook*, 7th ed. Wadsworth, 2012)

* **The Lead-in to the Thesis Statement**  
  "Most teachers like some artful lead-in to the **thesis statement**, and therefore like to see a 'hook' statement that begins the essay--a statement that romances the reader, an invitational statement that lets the reader know that the writer has something worthwhile to say. . . . The hook may present an [example](http://grammar.about.com/od/e/g/examplerhetoricterm.htm), [description](http://grammar.about.com/od/d/g/description2ter.htm), or even an [anecdote](http://grammar.about.com/od/ab/g/anecdoteterm.htm) that connects to the thesis statement. The hook may be more than one sentence. Going from the hook to the thesis statement is a 'link' sentence. The hook-link-thesis statement sequence does two things: 1) it communicates that the writer is in the zone, observing the expected conventions; and 2) it allows the reader to transition."  
  (Amy Benjamin, *Writing Put to the Test: Teaching for the High Stakes Essay*. Eye On Education, 2006)

* **Revising a Thesis Statement**  
  To test your thesis, consider the following questions:

- How can you state your thesis more precisely or more clearly? Should the wording be more specific? . . .  
- In what ways will your thesis interest your [audience](http://grammar.about.com/od/ab/g/audiencterm.htm)? What can you do to increase that interest?  
- Will your thesis be manageable, given your limits of time and knowledge? If not, what can you do to make it more manageable?  
- What evidence from your research supports each aspect of your thesis? What additional evidence do you need?

(Andrea A. Lunsford, *The St. Martin's Handbook*. Bedford/St. Martin's, 2008)

**The Thesis Statement**

This is not an exhaustive list of bad thesis statements, but here're five kinds of problems I've seen most often. Notice that the last two, #4 and #5, are not necessarily incorrect or illegitimate thesis statements, but, rather, inappropriate for the purposes of this course. They may be useful forms for papers on different topics in other courses.

1. **The non-thesis thesis.**

A thesis takes a position on an issue. It is different from a topic sentence in that a thesis statement is not neutral. It announces, in addition to the topic, the argument you want to make or the point you want to prove. This is your own opinion that you intend to back up. This is your reason and motivation for writing.

**Bad Thesis 1**: In his article Stanley Fish shows that we don't really have the right to free speech.

**Bad Thesis 2**: This paper will consider the advantages and disadvantages of certain restrictions on free speech.

**Better Thesis 1**: Stanley Fish's argument that free speech exists more as a political prize than as a legal reality ignores the fact that even as a political prize it still serves the social end of creating a general cultural atmosphere of tolerance that may ultimately promote free speech in our nation just as effectively as any binding law.

**Better Thesis 2**: Even though there may be considerable advantages to restricting hate speech, the possibility of chilling open dialogue on crucial racial issues is too great and too high a price to pay.

1. **The overly broad thesis.**

A thesis should be as specific as possible, and it should be tailored to reflect the scope of the paper. It is not possible, for instance, to write about the history of English literature in a 5 page paper. In addition to choosing simply a smaller topic, strategies to narrow a thesis include specifying a method or perspective or delineating certain limits.

**Bad Thesis 1**: There should be no restrictions on the 1st amendment.

**Bad Thesis 2**: The government has the right to limit free speech.

**Better Thesis 1**: There should be no restrictions on the 1st amendment if those restrictions are intended merely to protect individuals from unspecified or otherwise unquantifiable or unverifiable "emotional distress."

**Better Thesis 2**: The government has the right to limit free speech in cases of overtly racist or sexist language because our failure to address such abuses would effectively suggest that our society condones such ignorant and hateful views.

1. **The incontestable thesis.**

A thesis must be arguable. And in order for it to be arguable, it must present a view that someone might reasonably contest. Sometimes a thesis ultimately says, "we should be good," or "bad things are bad." Such thesis statements are tautological or so universally accepted that there is no need to prove the point.

**Bad Thesis 1**: Although we have the right to say what we want, we should avoid hurting other people's feelings.

**Bad Thesis 2**: There are always alternatives to using racist speech.

**Better Thesis 1**: If we can accept that emotional injuries can be just as painful as physical ones we should limit speech that may hurt people's feelings in ways similar to the way we limit speech that may lead directly to bodily harm.

**Better Thesis 2**: The "fighting words" exception to free speech is not legitimate because it wrongly considers speech as an action.

1. **The "list essay" thesis.**

A good argumentative thesis provides not only a position on an issue, but also suggests the structure of the paper. The thesis should allow the reader to imagine and anticipate the flow of the paper, in which a sequence of points logically prove the essay's main assertion. A list essay provides no such structure, so that different points and paragraphs appear arbitrary with no logical connection to one another.

**Bad Thesis 1**: There are many reasons we need to limit hate speech.

**Bad Thesis 2**: None of the arguments in favor of regulating pornography are persuasive.

**Better Thesis 1**: Among the many reasons we need to limit hate speech the most compelling ones all refer to our history of discrimination and prejudice, and it is, ultimately, for the purpose of trying to repair our troubled racial society that we need hate speech legislation.

**Better Thesis 2**: None of the arguments in favor of regulating pornography are persuasive because they all base their points on the unverifiable and questionable assumption that the producers of pornography necessarily harbor ill will specifically to women.

1. **The research paper thesis.**

In an other course this would not be at all unacceptable, and, in fact, possibly even desirable. But in this kind of course, a thesis statement that makes a factual claim that can be verified only with scientific, sociological, psychological or other kind of experimental evidence is not appropriate. You need to construct a thesis that you are prepared to prove using the tools you have available, without having to consult the world's leading expert on the issue to provide you with a definitive judgment.

**Bad Thesis 1**: Americans today are not prepared to give up on the concept of free speech.

**Bad Thesis 2**: Hate speech can cause emotional pain and suffering in victims just as intense as physical battery.

**Better Thesis 1**: Whether or not the cultural concept of free speech bears any relation to the reality of 1st amendment legislation and jurisprudence, its continuing social function as a promoter of tolerance and intellectual exchange trumps the call for politicization (according to Fish's agenda) of the term.

**Better Thesis 2**: The various arguments against the regulation of hate speech depend on the unspoken and unexamined assumption that emotional pain is either trivial.

 Sample Thesis Statements

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A thesis statement:

•tells the reader how you will interpret the significance of the subject matter under discussion.

•is a road map for the paper; in other words, it tells the reader what to expect from the rest of the paper.

•directly answers the question asked of you. A thesis is an interpretation of a question or subject, not the subject itself. The subject, or topic, of an essay might be World War II or Moby Dick; a thesis must then offer a way to understand the war or the novel.

•makes a claim that others might dispute.

•is usually a single sentence somewhere in your first paragraph that presents your argument to the reader. The rest of the paper, the body of the essay, gathers and organizes evidence that will persuade the reader of the logic of your interpretation.

Paragraph 1

In The Box Man, by Barbara Lazear Ascher, the protagonist reveals that a life of solitude need not always be lonely. Though the Box Man lives a life of solitude as a homeless wanderer, Ascher describes his “grand design” and “grandmotherly finger licking” to convince readers that their assumptions about homeless people are unfounded – and that they can live a dignified life. By describing the Box Man as “dignified” and “at ease”, Ascher paints a vivid picture of a man who chose a life a comfort and solitude and defeated loneliness by becoming his own friend.

Paragraph 2

In Upon the Burning of Our House, Anne Bradstreet ponders her unfortunate circumstances and appreciates that it was God’s will that her house burned to the ground. Bradstreet believed that every misfortune she encountered served to remind her of God’s will – in this case, she was reminded that “All is vanity” – a Biblical allusion meaning that everything in life is futile and the only worthy goal is entry into heaven. Bradstreet’s attitude is further revealed when she says “The world no longer let me love, / My hope and treasure lies above.” Bradstreet clearly feels that worldly life is fruitless; her sole concern is God.

Paragraph 3

In The Grapes of Wrath, John Steinbeck characterize the protagonist, Tom Joad, as a morally conscious person who stands up against evil. The image of Tom’s mother “slow with weariness” sitting and scraping potatoes affects Tom very much – so much that he is willing to give his life to rebel against the people who seek to harm his family. Through the use of imagery and diction, Steinbeck reveals Tom’s noble conscious and characterizes him as a rebellious – albeit rash – young man.

Paragraph 4

In the His Dark Materials Series by Philip Pullman, the setting is an essential element in the development and outcome of the plot in more ways than one. The protagonist, 11-year old Lyra Belacqua, lives in the precincts of Jordan College in Oxford growing up as an orphan among the old scholars. Her cheerful existence consisted of playing on the rooftops of the college and “waging war” with the local children. This contrasts sharply with the bright and exciting future she soon experiences after she escapes from the drudgery of college life. After escaping, Lyra begins a grand adventure, journeying to the north to meet armored bears, witches, and gyptians. The initial setting is important to the development of the plot because Lyra’s future resourcefulness and quick-wittedness in difficult situations were fine-tuned during the numerous challenges she faced as a child while fighting “wars” with the other local children. In addition, by understanding Lyra’s humble background, the reader can appreciate her future accomplishments.

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**THESIS STATEMENTS IN LITERARY ANALYSIS PAPERS**

\*The thesis statement is one of the (if not *the*) most important parts of your paper—think of it as the foundation of a house—if your foundation is weak and poorly constructed, what do you think happens to the house?

\*The thesis statement is the announcement of your analytical argument that you intend to make and prove in the duration of your paper. It is a road map for the paper—it tells the reader what to expect from the rest of the paper.

\*It should be placed somewhere in the Introduction of your paper—Many like to put it as the last sentence(s) of their Intro which is fine.

\*Successful thesis statements provoke thought and should read beautifully.

\*Your thesis statement should include two parts: WHAT and WHY.

\*WHAT: What claim are you making about the text?

\*WHY: Why should we care? Why is your claim important? Your thesis should answer the “so what?” question.

\*A thesis statement is usually, but can be more than, one sentence long.

Examples of Literary Thesis Statements:

\* “Mark Twain’s *Huckleberry Finn* is a great American novel.”

\*What’s wrong with this thesis statement?

\*An opinion about the book, not an argument.

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

\*Better? How so? What is still missing?

\*Doesn’t answer the “so what?” question—what is the point of the contrast? What does the contrast signify?

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

\*Even better?

\*It presents an interpretation of a literary work based on an analysis of it content and answers the “so what” question.

\* “Edgar Allen Poe’s work was affected greatly by the current events of his life, covering his family life, his childhood, and his career; these events changed his style and subject of his works.”

\*What’s wrong with this thesis statement?

\*More questions than answers: which works will be explored? What current events? What childhood or career events? How did Poe’s style change and WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

\* “There is a lot of symbolism in *The Scarlet Letter*.”

\*Bad? Why?

\* “Hawthorne’s use of symbolism in *The Scarlet Letter* falters and ultimately breaks down with the introduction of the character Pearl.”

\*Better? Why?

\* “The character of Ben in Arthur Miller’s *Death of a Salesman* is a great [or important, or crucial, or unforgettable, etc.] character.”

\*What’s wrong with thesis?

\*This does not say enough to serve as the basis for an essay. Besides, each of these judgments is entirely a matter of personal opinion because none of them define the criteria by which the judgment is being made.

\* “Through Paul’s experience behind the lines, at a Russian prisoner of war camp, and especially under bombardment in the trenches Erich Maria Remarque realistically shows how war dehumanizes a man.”

\*What can we anticipate that the author of this thesis will prove to us in the rest of the paper?

More Help for Thesis statement

An argumentative paper makes a claim about a topic and justifies this claim with specific evidence. The claim could be an opinion, a policy proposal, an evaluation, a cause-and-effect statement, or an interpretation. The goal of the argumentative paper is to convince the audience that the claim is true based on the evidence provided.

• Your thesis statement should be specific—it should cover only what you will discuss in your paper and should be supported with specific evidence.

• The thesis statement usually appears at the end of the first paragraph of a paper.

• Your topic may change as you write, so you may need to revise your thesis statement to reflect exactly what you have discussed in the paper.

A thesis statement is an assertion, not a statement of fact or an observation.

• Fact or observation: People use many lawn chemicals.

• Thesis: People are poisoning the environment with chemicals merely to keep their lawns clean.

**A thesis statement is "a basic argument” that clearly articulates what the thesis or is expected to demonstrate**

Writing the Literary Analysis by Brian Yothers

What is Literary Analysis?

It’s literary

It’s an analysis

It’s--

An Argument!

It may also involve research on and analysis of secondary sources

**How is it “literary”?**

Usually, a literary analysis will involve a discussion of a text *as writing*, thus the term literary, which means “having to do with letters”

This will involve the use of certain concepts that are very specifically associated with literature

Important literary concepts

***The Basics***

Plot

Setting

Narration/point of view

Characterization

Symbol

Metaphor

Genre

Irony/ambiguity

*Other key concepts*

Historical context

Social, political, economic contexts

Ideology

Multiple voices

Various critical orientations

Literary theory

**What is an Analysis?**

An analysis of a literary work may discuss

How the various components of an individual work relate to each other

How two separate literary works deal with similar concepts or forms

How concepts and forms in literary works relate to larger aesthetic, political, social, economic, or religious contexts

**How is a literary analysis an argument?**

When writing a literary analysis, you will focus on specific attribute(s) of the text(s).

When discussing these attributes, you will want to make sure that you are making a specific, arguable point (thesis) about these attributes.

You will defend this point with reasons and evidence drawn from the text. (Much like a lawyer!)

**Which is the best thesis statement?**

*Moby-Dick* is about the problem of evil.

***Moby-Dick* is boring and pointless.**

*Moby-Dick* is about a big, white whale.

The use of “whiteness” in *Moby-Dick* illustrates the uncertainty about the meaning of life that Ishmael expresses throughout the novel.

**How do I support a thesis statement?**

Examples from the text:

Direct quotations

Summaries of scenes

Paraphrase

Other critics’ opinions

Historical and social context

Always remember to read carefully and highlight useful passages and quotes!

**What is a secondary source?**

A book or article that discusses the text you are discussing

A book or article that discusses a theory related to the argument you are making

A book or article that discusses the social and historical context of the text you are discussing

**How do I find secondary sources?**

MLA International Bibliography

Dictionary of Literary Biography

Discipline-specific sources

Example: America: History and Life for American literature

Other search engines

A bibliography that is part of your text

Ask someone who knows

**Integrating secondary sources**

When you use secondary sources, be sure to show how they relate to your thesis

Don’t overuse any one secondary source, or for that matter, secondary sources in general

Remember this is your paper, your argument—the secondary sources are just helping you out.

Never, never, never plagiarize!

Overview of Literary Analysis:

When writing a literary analysis:

Be familiar with literary terms

Analyze specific items

Make an a argument

Make appropriate use of secondary sources

Consult instructors and tutors for help when needed