

Thesis statement workshop script and examples

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At the end of this workshop, students should be able to

- ***Explain the elements of a thesis statement***
- ***Develop and test thesis statements for debatability, focus, and insight***
- ***Apply those strategies to their own thesis statements***

Elements of a Thesis Statement

What is a thesis statement?

Knowledge starts with curiosity, and curiosity starts with questions. When you look around and ask how or why something came to be, then you are taking the first step toward knowledge. When you eliminate obvious wrong answers from your *how* or *why* questions and narrow your focus to explore one or two potential explanations, then you are engaging in what the Greeks called "*hypotithenai*," in which you "suppose" or otherwise construct a possible explanation for the *how* or *why* question you initially asked.

- You use the related term, "hypothesis" to describe a testable theory.
- You use the term "thesis" to describe an academic argument that you're making.
- You use the term "thesis statement" to describe a one or two-sentence answer to a question that you've explored in an essay.

Hypotheses, theses, or thesis statements cannot be proven to be "true." (In that case, you'd call them "facts.") However, they can be supported, and they can also be disproved.

A successful essay is an investigation, with you as the investigator and your thesis statement as your conclusion about the results of that investigation. Sometimes the biggest challenge in an investigation is figuring out what question or questions to ask. This, as well, is true of a thesis statement, which addresses one solid investigative question [link eventually to "investigative question" module] about the topic: Who? What? When? Where? How? Why? Under what conditions? Unlike some investigative questions, thesis statements answer only with conclusions, not with facts, so thesis statements can be disproved or supported, but cannot be statements of facts.

Why can thesis statements be so difficult to construct?

If you're trying to write your conclusion before you've actually determined the right question, much less the right answer, your thesis statement won't work. That's why rough drafts are so important to a writer, because they give you a chance to investigate your tentative answer before using it as a thesis statement. Other related problems include

- Trying to give an answer to a question that you haven't figured out how to ask yet.
- Squeezing a too general question into the limits of the assignment
- Stretching a too narrow question within the limits of the assignment
- Lacking any sense of an answer to your question

Evaluating someone else's thesis statement

How do you know a useful thesis statement when you see one?

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1. A thesis is NOT a statement of fact. A successful thesis statement is one with which a reasonable person can disagree and even construct a counterargument to the thesis statement. That is, the statement is **debatable**.
2. The successful thesis statement reflects the scope and conditions of the assignment. A good thesis statement will give the reader a preview of what the rest of the paper will discuss. The size of the claim forecasts the length of the paper, and the claim itself gives the direction that the paper will take. In short, a successful thesis statement is **focused**.
3. The successful thesis statement reflects thoughtful engagement with the topic and reader. In short, a successful thesis statement is **insightful**.

Evaluating and strengthening your own thesis statement

How do you know if your particular thesis statement is useful?

1. Locate it in the paper (If you can't find it, it's **definitely** not useful).
2. Test it on the "usefulness scale."
3. Answer the following questions. If, based on the thesis statement alone, you can answer the first three, in the order in which you ask them, you've got a winner (unless the answer to the final question is "no"). If you come to a question that you cannot answer, revise at that point.
 - a. What, if any, investigative question is addressed?
 - b. What will be investigated?
 - c. How will it be investigated?
 - d. Can the conclusion (answer to the question) be addressed within the conditions of the essay?

How can you make a less-than-useful (weak) thesis statement stronger?

Sometimes you have to discard it, particularly if you find that your investigation either meets a dead end or doesn't really address the question you want to ask, but sometimes you work with usable material inside the statement. Even if you can't find the implied conclusion to an investigative topic, you might be able to locate a topic, or a point of view, or better, both. Using your current version, try the following:

1. Circle key words or phrases that could be useful as subjects or points of view. Ignore general words like "many," "very," "interesting," and phrases like "This story is about . . ." or "The author says . . ." or "Critics believe that . . .".
2. Ask an investigative question about the key word/phrase(s) you've isolated. Better yet, ask several investigative questions.
3. State your tentative answer to the question.
4. If general phrases like "many factors," or "variety of issues," have snuck into your answer, try substituting small numbers.
5. Repeat the process until you can see a forecast of the structure and depth of your paper.



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6. Check for *debatability*, *focus*, and *insight*.

Developing a thesis statement

In class activities

In class activity #1: Evaluating a thesis statement

If you have to choose one of three essays about the University of Connecticut to read based on the usefulness of the thesis statement in that essay, which thesis statement would you choose? Why?

1. "The University of Connecticut is the state's land grant university." (*Not debatable, doesn't respond to an investigative question*)
2. "The University of Connecticut is the peoples' choice." (*debatable, very broad, potentially insightful*)
3. "The University of Connecticut is a strong alternative to private colleges in Connecticut for students seeking undergraduate and graduate degrees because of its wide range of majors, its relative affordability, and its accessibility." (*debatable, answers an investigative question of "What might Connecticut students consider when choosing where to attend college?"; suggests the line of reasoning the essay will take, potentially insightful*)

Of these three thesis statements, which one is the least helpful to the reader in forecasting the theme and direction of the essay? Why?

1. *Beowulf* is a better story than *The Life of Pi*. (*too broad and gives no indication of where the paper will go from here*)
2. *Pi* and *Beowulf* are characters whose physical, mental, and spiritual strengths are tested by their adventures. (*debatable, focused, and potentially insightful*)
3. *The Life of Pi* takes place in contemporary times, while *Beowulf* is set in the middle ages. (*not debatable*)

Try rating a thesis statement you have written on this "Usefulness Scale" (If you cross the line, you need more work; if you're near the line, consider some modifications):

Debatable _____	Too factual
Focused _____	Too big
Insightful _____	Too boring

Additional practice

If you'd like some additional practice at evaluating the usefulness of thesis statements, compare your rating of the following statements as "debatable," "focused," and "insightful" with the explanations provided in the commentary. Remember, whether you rate a statement as "focused" may depend on the length and complexity of the essay you're writing.



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1. I hate summer driving in Connecticut

Debatability?

Focus?

Insight?

(Explanation) A reasonable person cannot counterargue that this writer hates summer driving, so the statement is NOT debatable. The statement provides shape for any later statements, so it is NOT focused. The statement offers no new ideas nor does it bring clarity to the topic of “summer driving in Connecticut.” In other words, the sentence is useless as a thesis statement.

2. Many factors contribute to miserable summer driving in Connecticut.

Debatability?

Focus?

Insight?

(Explanation) We can reasonably disagree with the writer about whether summer driving in Connecticut is miserable, so the statement is debatable. “Many factors” doesn’t help us blueprint the paper, although perhaps we could see the shape of the paper if we talked about “two” or “three” factors rather than “many.” Finally, this statement might offer some insight about why summer driving is miserable. This statement is potentially useful, but needs to be more focused.

3. Shakespeare’s 16th and 17th century plays continue to intrigue 21st century readers.

Debatability?

Focus?

Insight?

(Explanation) We can debate the statement by counterarguing that Shakespeare’s . . . plays do NOT intrigue 21st century readers, so we meet the first test for usefulness. The second test, “focus,” is harder to see in this statement, by re-asking the investigative question to elicit a thesis of HOW or WHY the plays intrigue 21st century readers, we might also discover whether this statement is insightful.

4. Einstein’s equation proposed that energy has mass.

Debatability?

Focus?

Insight?

(Explanation) This statement is either true or false, but not debatable, so it has no value as a thesis statement.

5. Hamlet’s characteristic of reasoned indecision sets him apart from contemporaneous stage characters.

Debatability?

Focus?

Insight?

(Explanation) We can counterargue this, so the statement is debatable. The terms “reasoned indecision” and “contemporaneous stage characters” provide focus and shape (contrast Hamlet



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with other characters) and possible insights. This looks like a pretty useful thesis statement, depending on how narrowly the writer defines “contemporaneous stage characters.”

6. Einstein’s theory of relativity is the factor most singularly responsible for changing the world view of physics.

Debatability?

Focus?

Insight?

(Explanation) This is certainly debatable since a reasonable person might argue for a different factor. The statement forecasts a rather long paper, so the focus may or many not be appropriate depending on the assignment. The statement is potentially insightful, assuming the statement can be supported.

7. Harold Bloom argues that Hamlet is the first modern literary character.

Debatability?

Focus?

Insight?

(Explanation). The statement is not about whether Hamlet is the first modern literary character, but whether Harold Bloom argues this or not, and is therefore either true or false, but not debatable. However, the assertion that “Hamlet is the first modern literary character” is debatable, focused, and insightful.

8. The scientific process is as subjective as any other process for gaining knowledge.

Debatability?

Focus?

Insight?

(Explanation) The statement has several counterarguments that make it highly debatable. The terms “subjective” and “process for gaining knowledge” shape the argument. The statement challenges the traditional definition of science as “objective” so offers potential insight if successfully argued.

Evaluating your own thesis statement

How do you know if your particular thesis statement is useful?

4. Locate it in the paper (If you can’t find it, it’s **definitely** not useful).
5. Test it on the “usefulness scale.”
6. Answer the following questions. If, based on the thesis statement alone, you can answer the first three, in the order in which you ask them, you’ve got a winner (unless the answer to the final question is “no”). If you come to a question that you cannot answer, revise at that point.
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 - c. How will it be investigated?



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- d. Can the conclusion (answer to the question) be addressed within the conditions of the essay?

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7. Circle key words or phrases that could be useful as subjects or points of view. Ignore general words like "many," "very," "interesting," and phrases like "This story is about . . ." or "The author says . . ." or "Critics believe that . . .".
8. Ask an investigative question about the key word/phrase(s) you've isolated. Better yet, ask several investigative questions.
9. State your tentative answer to the question.
10. If general phrases like "many factors," or "variety of issues," have snuck into your answer, try substituting small numbers.
11. Repeat the process until you can see a forecast of the structure and depth of your paper.
12. Check for *debatability*, *focus*, and *insight*.

In-class activity #2: Developing and evaluating thesis statements

1. Ask students: "What is a thesis?" Put all the definitions on the board/monitor and discuss them in conjunction with the professor. If the students seem quiet or slow to respond, invite them to "pair" and then "share."
2. Give students a topic that you've cleared with the professor, perhaps related to the course material or perhaps simply a topic everyone knows something about. Example topics: capital punishment or cell phones.
3. Give students 3-5 minutes to write a thesis on the topic.
4. Ask students to volunteer their theses and write them on the board/monitor.
5. Talk with students about criteria for a good thesis, perhaps using the terms "debatable," "focused," and "insightful."
6. As a class look at the thesis statements on the board and mix & match until you have a good thesis.
7. If it's convenient, pull out the thesis statement from a published essay, perhaps one the students will be reading soon in the class, and put it on the board as well so students can see an excellent thesis statement.



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In-Class Activity #3

Create a handout in which you choose either 3 or 4 claims from an upcoming essay or a graphic of some sort and ask students to come up with a thesis that explains and analyzes the evidence you've provided. Below is an example of such a handout in preparation for Derek Leebaert and Timothy Dickinson's "A World to Understand," whose thesis is that the history of technological advancements is marked by periods of great activity, usually accompanying a meeting of great minds.

(Handout sample)

You are working for BigTechCompany, under a team leader who doesn't always give you very much direction. This team leader has noticed that you are quite a good writer, and often asks you to prepare memos and other written work.

Today your team leader has given you a particularly strange assignment. She has provided you with four claims that, for the purpose of this assignment, you must accept as true. You know better than to argue about minor details when presented with work like this. It is suggested that you think about these claims and consider ways in which they may fit together. Your assignment is to come up with a thesis statement which explains these facts, and to outline an argument paper which uses these claims as evidence. You are welcome to supplement these claims with your own in order to produce a coherent argument.

The claims are:

- *There was a great surge in creativity in China in about 500 B.C.*
- *In 1825, U.S. President Franklin Pierce and acclaimed American novelist Nathaniel Hawthorne graduated from the same highschool class.*
- *There was a great surge in technology around the world in about 500 B.C.*
- *Between 510 and 420 B.C, Athens produced the highest concentration of human achievement in history.*

Another example would be to have students come up with an explanation for a scientific graph that they might find.



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Addendum

(Script for conversation between writer and listener about strengthening a thesis statement)

Writer: “Many factors contribute to miserable summer driving in Connecticut.”

Listener: Throw away “many factors.” Love the back part of your statement: “miserable summer driving in Connecticut,” but what makes summer driving in Connecticut so miserable? Why the summer as opposed to the winter, when there are ice and storms to worry about? Do all Connecticut roads lead to miserable driving in the summer?

Writer: Okay. Slow down. Let me take one question at a time. Congestion, particularly on I-95 but also on secondary roads following delays or traffic jams, more delays and traffic jams because of more traffic in the summer; feels worse on I-95 because is the only east-west corridor (route 1 gets even more congested) and people seem to be bottlenecked traveling between New York and Rhode Island; more traffic in summer, particularly during the weekends and holidays; sometimes two, sometimes three lanes, speed limits vary, but most drivers don’t pay attention anyway”

Listener: Okay, I can certainly see why you want to write about this, and now I understand more about the “many factors.” Some of them look more significant than others.

Writer: All right. Some of them ARE more significant than others. Also, I think I just want to focus on I-95, because I’ve got lots to say about that stretch of road. How about “Summer driving on I-95 between New York and Rhode Island is miserable because of increased congestion, inconsistent traffic patterns, and aggressively careless drivers.”

Listener: Good. Now I can see a shape in your essay—introduction with body paragraphs about congestion, inconsistent traffic patterns, and aggressively careless drivers), but what about depth? What can you say besides that these factors exist? For instance, how can summer driving on I-95 in Connecticut be improved?”

Writer: I’ve already identified factors that make it miserable, so the answers to this question would be to reduce congestion, make traffic patterns more consistent, and reduce careless driving by . . . for example, creating alternate routes, then redesigning I-95; and enforcing speeding and careless driving laws more rigorously. I think I could make a pretty effective thesis statement using the first two factors:

“Creating a second major thoroughfare between New York and Rhode Island and then redesigning I-95 would reduce the misery of summer driving in Connecticut.”

Listener: You’ve sold me. Make sure the factors that make summer driving stay in your essay to support your thesis statement, which, as it turns out, also points to your conclusion.

