



CONSTRUCTING A THESIS STATEMENT

What is a thesis? Although the thesis can be found almost anywhere in an essay or other piece of writing, it is usually found at or near the end of the introductory paragraph. The thesis or thesis statement refers to a paper's *main argument* or *central claim*. Unlike an ordinary statement (which may merely state a fact or idea), a thesis takes a stance or position on an issue, usually addressing the "why" or "how". In subsequent paragraphs (i.e., body paragraphs), the author will often present facts and supporting claims aimed at proving the thesis. In this handout, we will elaborate on how to construct an effective thesis statement.

I. THE THESIS QUESTION

- **A good thesis derives from a significant, complex, and original question.** Since the thesis is your conclusion to a scholarly argument, there must be a clear question at stake for you to answer. You need to ask thoughtful questions about your examples and source material to develop a good thesis.
- Good thesis questions may challenge accepted wisdom or complicate a seemingly clear-cut topic.

II. CONSTRUCTING A THESIS

- Start with a **topic** (i.e., a very general area of interest) then narrow it down to a more specific **issue**.
Topic: Japanese Americans during World War II
Issue: Discrimination against Japanese Americans during World War II
- Develop a **question** around it. This question will help give direction to your topic.
Example: Why did government officials allow discrimination against Japanese Americans?
- Develop a unique perspective on your question that **answers** it. This is a thesis statement.
Example: Government officials allowed discrimination against Japanese Americans not because it was in the nation's interest, but because it provided a concrete enemy for people to focus on.
- Read through your thesis again, and re-word vague words and phrases to be more **specific**.

III. APPROACHES TO CONSTRUCTING A THESIS

- **Approach #1 – Start with a Concession:** Use a concessive clause, such as *although*, to make your point stand out by contrasting it with an opposing position. Then introduce the heart of your argument in the main clause. The subject of the main clause should be the subject of the paper. Do not present it with a statement like "I will show," where you are the subject of the main clause.
Example: Although many people might assume that George Bailey is influenced by the townspeople because he is weak-willed or lacks independence, it is actually because of Bailey's location in the town's social network that he is influenced to abandon his dreams.

Source: The Thesis. <http://www.bowdoin.edu/writing-guides/thesis.htm>

Note that this thesis also includes a *because* clause, which forces you to summarize support for your thesis as concisely as possible.

- **Approach #2 – A Letter to the Reader:** An exercise that might help you develop your thesis is to write a letter to your reader:

(1) Dear Reader: I want to convince you that... [This is a *hypothesis* or “**what**”]

(2) The main reasons why you should believe me are that... [This is a summary of your *evidence* and logic, or “**how**”]

(3) You should care about my thesis because... [This comments on the *significance* of your argument, or “**why**”]

Example: Dear Reader: I want to convince you that **the social context in Europe between the 18th and 20th centuries affected the questions and interpretations of archaeologists.** The main reason why you should believe me is that **North American archaeologists claimed that the Moundbuilders could not have been built by Native Americans, which reinforced the historical context of colonialism.** You should care about my thesis because **it shows the biases of archaeological research.**

From this exercise, you can form your thesis:

The social context in Europe between the 18th and 20th centuries affected the questions and interpretations of archaeologists, such as when North American archaeologists claimed that the Moundbuilders could not have been built by Native Americans. This reinforced the historical context of colonialism and reveals the biases of archaeologists.

IV. THE INTRODUCTION

- The first paragraph of your paper should define the problem your paper addresses, define key words and concepts you will use, and present your thesis. The thesis, while it effectively encapsulates the argument, cannot stand alone. It requires the sentences which precede it to "set it up." Here are some guidelines for what to include in your introduction:
 1. What is the general **topic** of your paper? Provide the reader with the context necessary to understand your thesis. Introduce and define key concepts and terms you will be using.
 2. What are the **examples** you will focus on? Introduce them briefly. Explain the **significance** of examining these examples. What insights does your analysis of the examples promise?
 3. What factors explain the situation or behavior in this example? This is the **thesis**.