



OWLS Writing Guides: THESIS STATEMENT

The **thesis** of an essay is its main idea, claim, or central proposition—the writer’s particular viewpoint on the subject under discussion. The **thesis statement** is (usually) a single sentence that expresses this viewpoint concisely and sums up the central **claim** of the essay. It may state the writer’s position on an issue, offer an interpretation or evaluation of a text, or assert some other way of understanding a subject. In all cases, a good thesis statement shares these basic characteristics.

1. A good thesis statement identifies the topic of the essay and makes an *assertion* about the topic.

Topic + *assertion about the topic* = Thesis statement

This assertion is the **controlling idea** that directs and determines how the topic is developed in the rest of the essay. Notice how the assertion in each of the following thesis statements suggests a different path for developing the topic of study abroad programs:

Study abroad programs *should be federally funded at all public universities*. (Essay arguing in favor of an action)

Study abroad programs *benefit students intellectually, emotionally, and socially*. (Essay explaining benefits)

Study abroad programs *opened my mind to new ideas and ways of thinking*. (Essay reflecting on personal experience)

2. A good thesis statement is a focused, direct, and confident assertion, not a statement of purpose or an announcement of the topic, nor a wishy-washy or confusing statement that fails to stake out a clear position.

Statement of purpose: This essay will examine the relationship between gun laws and murder rates in major U.S. cities.

Announcement: In this essay, I will argue that tighter restrictions on assault weapons will help to reduce the murder rate.

Lacks a clear viewpoint: Deaths attributed to illegal assault weapons would be reduced with stronger gun laws in place, but such restrictions would also infringe on the rights of law-abiding citizens wishing to purchase guns. Clearly, this is a very complicated issue that needs a solution.

Strong, unambiguous thesis: Tighter restrictions on the sale of assault weapons will reduce murder rates in major U.S. cities.

3. A good thesis statement is a general assertion, not a factual statement or an assertion so obvious or so easily verifiable that it doesn’t require support or justify discussion.

Fact: Tuition at my college is \$40,000 per year.

Thesis: College tuition should be tax deductible.

Too obvious: Lots of teens drive recklessly.

Thesis: The high accident rate among teen drivers could be reduced with better driver training.

4. A good thesis statement is one that the writer must prove, explain, or show, and that the reader might dispute or question.

The practice of racial profiling by law enforcement violates civil liberties and should not be allowed.

Austen’s protagonist Elizabeth Bennett is a weak female character.

These statements clearly stake out a position on a debatable issue or subject. Sometimes the counterargument (or antithesis) is included in the thesis statement to establish the claim as a contestable one, as in these examples:

Although many believe that the rise in violent crimes justifies extraordinary measures, racial profiling by law enforcement should not be practiced.

Contrary to the way many readers perceive her, Austen's protagonist Elizabeth Bennett is a weak female character.

Even when a claim is not overtly argumentative, the thesis statement should still present a particular interpretation, viewpoint, or understanding of the subject that can be shown or explained to the reader with evidence, as in these examples:

In Keats's sonnet "On the Sea," the poet uses imagery, personification, and hyperbole to impress upon the reader the ideals of the Romanticism movement of his time.

An effective writing process takes the writer through several steps, from invention to final editing.

The artist's early compositions show a vitality and energy lacking in his later work.

My trip to Yosemite National Park taught me to appreciate both the beauty and the danger of nature.

5. A good thesis is precise, not vague or overly broad.

Too broad: Social networking sites have become very important in our lives.

Better: Social networking sites have changed the ways in which we connect with friends and family.

Vague: Eating healthy is a good idea.

Specific: Adding more fresh fruit to your diet, while reducing fats and sugars, will help improve your general health.

Vague: "Sonny's Blues" is an important work about drug abuse.

Specific: In "Sonny's Blues," Baldwin presents a complex picture of drug use as a way to cope with sorrow and fear.

6. A good thesis *may* preview the subtopics of the essay. Common in academic papers is the thesis statement that identifies the topic, makes a claim about the topic, AND previews major supporting points.

Topic + *assertion about the topic* + supporting points/reasons = Thesis

Goodman's argument *is convincing* because she creates vivid examples, lively metaphors, and an engaging persona.

As seen in this example, the thesis may follow the structure and logic of a 'because' sentence, where the main clause contains the main claim and the part that follows 'because' states several the supporting reasons. The same thesis idea may be expressed in a different grammatical structure:

Goodman's vivid examples, lively metaphors, and engaging persona persuade the reader to agree with her argument.

In Keats's sonnet "On the Sea," the poet uses imagery, personification, and hyperbole to impress upon the reader the ideal of the Romanticism movement of his time.

Changes in how the land is used for agriculture, in deforestation, and for landfills could alter the build-up of greenhouse gasses.

Most first-year students face many challenges, such as managing their time, maintaining a healthy lifestyle, and making new friends.