WHAT IS A THESIS STATEMENT?

A thesis is a declaration of an essay's argument. It provides a foundation for smaller arguments and guides the reader through the essay. Usually located near the end of the introduction, a thesis narrows your general topic to a specific, focused argument. A good thesis should answer the question, "What does this paper prove?"

Thesis vs. Topic

One of the most common mistakes students make is confusing the thesis with the topic.

- A thesis is a specific statement; a topic declares a general subject area.
- A thesis clearly takes one side of an argument; a topic is neutral.
- A thesis outlines the essay for the reader; a topic informs the reader of the essay's scope.
- A thesis is always a complete sentence or two; a topic usually is a fragment.
- A thesis is presented after introducing the general ideas; a topic might not be explicitly stated, but is clear within the first few sentences.

Examples:

Topic: the role of women in *Jude the Obscure* and *Dracula*

Thesis: Both Hardy and Stoker give us women who reflect Victorian cultural anxieties over gender flexibility and are characterized in relation to the historical movements of the fin de siecle.

Topic: the exclusion of blacks and women in the original Constitution

Thesis: Though [the writers of the Constitution] made citizenship a party to which many people, most notably blacks and women, were not invited, the way in which they decided to run the party made the later inclusion of these groups and others possible.

Attributes of a Good Thesis

How can you evaluate the thesis of your paper or another author's? Here are the four most important characteristics of a good thesis.

A good thesis can be disagreed upon by reasonable people. For your thesis to take a stand, another side must be valid (though you don't have to agree with it). Trying to think of the other side of your thesis can strengthen your argument and test the importance of your thesis.

The thesis focuses the topic to the scope of the assignment. Don't try to prove something too broad for the length of the paper. The thesis should reflect only what your research, expertise, and analysis show in the assigned number of pages. The author of the first thesis, for example, has narrowed her topic from "Victorian literature" to two works (by Hardy and Stoker).

The thesis contains one main idea. You may have twenty important arguments in your paper, but your thesis should show how those ideas relate, not just list them. Avoid a "laundry list" thesis that simply points to each of your body paragraphs' topic sentences.

The thesis anticipates conclusions. A good thesis states what the reader learns from reading the smaller arguments in the body. Don't save your thesis until the conclusion; instead, present the thesis first and back it up with other ideas. We can assume from reading the second sample thesis above that the author will conclude by showing that other groups, specifically blacks and women, have become citizens because of the Constitution's flexibility.

Remember, even a good thesis may not fit the paper as it is transformed through revisions. Spend a good portion of your revision time making sure your thesis works with what the paper says as a whole.

For more information on this topic, see:
Academic Writing by Ilona Leki
Writing from A to Z
http://www.richmond.edu/~writing/wweb/thesis.html
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