

# What is a thesis statement and how do I write one?

STEP

15

*'Statements are sentences, but not all sentences are statements.'*

Willard Quine

## A Reflection

Look at the following definition and introduction to an essay entitled: 'Is a thesis statement important in an essay?'

- According to the definition, can you identify the 'thesis statement'?

Thesis statement: A sentence in an academic essay which presents the central argument of the essay in concise language.

According to Reid (2000: 77), the thesis statement is the 'strongest, clearest statement in the essay', a view shared by the Online Writing Lab (2010) who, in addition, make a distinction between thesis statements used in analytical, expository and argumentative pieces of writing. While there are a number of important aspects in an essay, such as structure, cohesion and the logical development of ideas, the thesis statement is related to all of these features. For, without a thesis statement, an essay has no controlling idea or central focus, making the development of ideas an extremely challenging proposition. Divided into three parts, this essay looks first at the structure of a thesis statement. Subsequently, section two examines the language which should be employed, and section three common problems related to the writing of thesis statements.

### References:

Online Writing Lab (2010). *The Purdue Online Writing Lab*. <http://owl.english.purdue.edu>. Retrieved 08/04/10.

Reid, J. (2000). *The Process of Composition*. New York: Addison Wesley Longman.

- Having identified the thesis statement, can you identify its key characteristics?

## B Contextualization

These thesis statements were rejected. Match the draft with the teacher's comments which identify the problem.

1. The centrality of the thesis statement in the essay is an incontrovertible truth, for without it the epistemological evolution of the argument is an impossibility.
2. In this essay, I will look at the importance of thesis statements.
3. Thesis statements which use informal, vague language lead to the breakdown of the entire academic structure.
4. Without the thesis statement, the entire purpose of the essay is completely and utterly lost; the result of this is chaos – the essay is just an anarchic collection of words.
5. What, then, is the reason why thesis statements are so important?

*The thesis statement should not be a question.*

*Too simple. This is a very vague generalization.*

*Too long and complex. You need to simplify the language.*

*Too specific. The scope of a thesis statement should be wider.*

*Too emotive. You should not use such passionate language.*

## **C** Analysis

### **What is a thesis statement and why is it important?**

As the example below from part A suggests, the thesis statement is the most important sentence in your essay.

- ✓ For, without a thesis statement, an essay has no controlling idea or central focus, making the development of ideas an extremely challenging proposition.

Two main functions of the thesis statement are to:

- state your position with regard to the essay title
- provide an overview of the essay and the direction in which it is going

Some other key characteristics of a thesis statement are listed below.

- It is always found in the introduction, generally towards the end.
- It should not just be a fact, but rather an idea which can be developed and built upon.
- It should be referred to again in the conclusion.
- Some thesis statements use *I*, but note that in many subject areas (or for many teachers), it may not be preferred (see Step 22).

### **What are some common problems associated with thesis statements?**

Thesis statements are known for being difficult to get right, so do not worry if you find writing them challenging. The important thing is to learn from your mistakes and to understand the feedback you are given. The example rejected thesis statements from part B represent the most common student problems in relation to this topic.

#### **Thesis statements should not be too long and complex.**

- ✗ The centrality of the thesis statement in the essay is an incontrovertible truth, for without it the epistemological evolution of the argument is an impossibility.
- Like all academic writing, a good thesis statement should be relatively easy to understand. Since it is such an important part of the essay, its meaning has to be transparent and clearly written. You should be careful with the grammar and language which you use in your thesis statement, and be sure that you do not make any basic errors. Generally speaking, thesis statements should not contain information such as data, quotations or references.

#### **Thesis statements should not be too general.**

- ✗ In this essay, I will look at the importance of thesis statements.
- This version of the thesis statement does not really say anything. It neither states the writer's position, nor provides an overview of the direction in which the essay is going. Bad thesis statements, such as this, often just paraphrase the essay title. This is *not* the purpose of a thesis statement.



## Thesis statements should not be too specific.

- X Thesis statements which use informal, vague language lead to the breakdown of the entire academic structure.

The thesis statement is not the place to provide specific details about your viewpoint. This thesis statement, for example, focuses in too much detail on one very specific aspect of the essay. This sentence is perfectly well written, but it sounds more like a **TOPIC SENTENCE** than a thesis statement. Getting the balance between generality and specificity is difficult, and you may need to redraft your thesis statement several times to get this right (see below).

## Thesis statements should not be too emotive.

- X Without the thesis statement, the entire purpose of the essay is completely and utterly lost; the result of this is chaos – the essay is just an anarchic collection of words.

Your academic writing in general should not be too emotive; this is especially true for your thesis statement. Evaluative language – words which strongly express your opinion but in a more academic way – can be extremely useful in thesis statements.

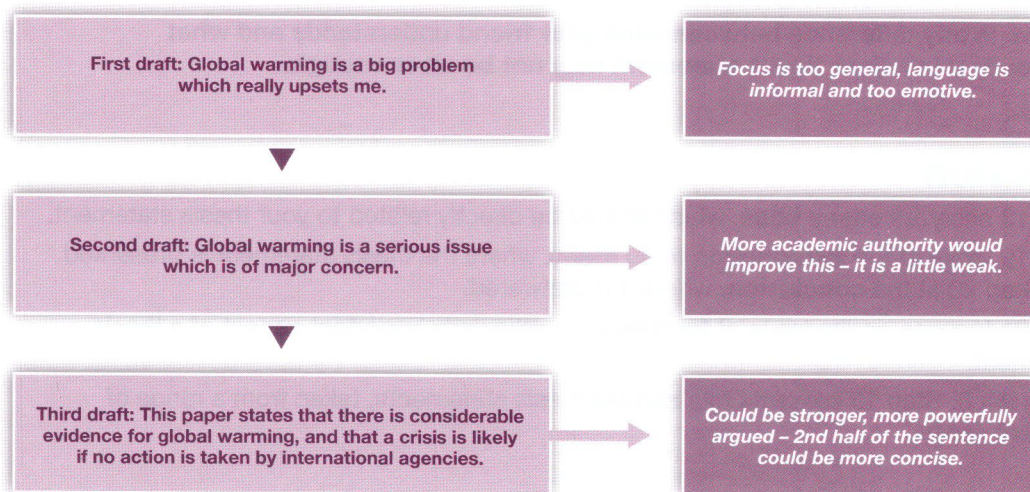
## Thesis statements should not be written as a question.

- X What, then, is the underlying reason why thesis statements are so important?

As its name suggests, the thesis statement should be a *statement*. Your title will generally be written in a question format – the thesis statement is the place where you present your reaction to the title.

### How can I edit my thesis statement?

Do not be surprised if you edit your thesis statement several times as you write your essay. Your ideas will develop and change as the essay progresses. Since your thesis statement is directly linked to the main thrust of your essay, it will have to change as well. An example is presented below for several drafts of a thesis statement for the essay title: 'Global warming: myth or reality?'



The final draft of the thesis statement – written in powerful language which clearly shows the attitude of the writer and the importance of the topic – appears on the following page.

## D Activation

Write an appropriate thesis statement for the following essay titles. An example is done for you.

Essay title	Thesis statement
1. Global warming: myth or reality?	<i>This essay will strongly argue that the scientific evidence for global warming is overwhelming, and that if multilateral action is not taken, a crisis will occur.</i>
2. 'All higher education should be completely free' (Angela Fitzpatrick). Discuss.	
3. Assess the impact of overseas students on British universities.	
4. Is democracy the best political system?	

## E Personalization

■ Look back at essays you have written recently and ask yourself:

- did you include a thesis statement? Is it obvious?
- if you did include one, is the language appropriate, according to the criteria outlined above?

Note: If the language is not appropriate, try editing it so that it says exactly what you want it to say.

■ Write a thesis statement for your next essay. Give it, and the essay title, to a friend and ask him or her to:

- suggest what they think the main focus of the essay is.
- predict what they think your opinion on the topic is.

■ If there is any difference between what your friend understands and what you really think, your thesis statement may not be clear enough.

## F Extension

- Step 13 analyzes **essay titles**, which should be directly related to your thesis statement.
- Step 19 looks at the **introduction** to an essay, where the thesis statement is presented, and Step 20 at the **conclusion**, where it is answered.
- Step 21 focuses on the issue of **formality**, a particularly important aspect of a thesis statement.
- Appendix 3, Step 15 presents four sample thesis statements, taken from a range of different essays.