

Thesis Statement

What is it?

- The thesis statement communicates the main idea of the paper.
- A good thesis statement will reveal your viewpoint; it should always be arguable. It is the point, the argument, the hypothesis. Academic papers are not simply about providing information—they need to make an argument. A good argument begins with a good thesis statement.
- It organizes the paper. The thesis is the roadmap of a paper, telling the reader what exactly you will be discussing and when.
- Anything that does not relate to the thesis should not be in the paper.

Example:

While **both northerners and southerners believed they fought against tyranny and oppression**, Northerners focused on the oppression of slaves while southerners defended their own right to self-government.

- *The main idea of the paper is:* The north and south possessed different kinds of reasons for fighting in the Civil War.
- *The order of the paper is:* Northerners focused on the oppression of slaves, then Southerners defended their own right to self-government. The body of the paper will provide more details for both of these arguments.
- *The thesis makes the claim:* Both northerners and southerners believed they fought against tyranny and oppression but in two different forms.

What are common problems?

Sometimes thesis statements are not clear. A good thesis will avoid unnecessary details and the writer should speak in third person. Do not use weak terms like “may have,” “involves,” “concerned with,” “focuses on,” and the like. Examples of common mistakes:

A description of the subject without stating an arguable point:

This paper will summarize the background of ancient Near Eastern child-sacrifice and seek to determine how this relates to Abraham’s near sacrifice of Isaac. [This is not a thesis statement.]

A weak, ambiguous, unclear example with technical jargon:

I hope to demonstrate that Abraham’s near sacrifice of Isaac **did not necessarily involve** direct contact with typical ancient Near Eastern child sacrifice ideological tendencies according to which some commoners **may have considered the ritual functionality of appeasing self-defeating divine injunctions.**

In order to avoid these common mistakes ask yourself the following questions:

- Does the thesis state a position that others can challenge or disagree with?
- Is the thesis specific enough? Is it a clear road map telling the reader what the argument will treat?
- Do the introduction and thesis pass the “so what” test? Do they tell the reader why this argument is important?
- Does the rest of the essay support the thesis?

A clear, specific thesis:

Although several ancient Near Eastern child sacrifice customs seem similar at first blush, Abraham's near sacrifice of Isaac **is exceptional** because the narrator begins by explaining that Abraham's God was testing him.

- *The main subject of the paper is:* Child sacrifices and Abraham's test.
- *The order of the paper:* The road map is clear because we know that first, the paper will discuss ancient Near Eastern child sacrifice as seemingly similar to Isaac's almost-sacrifice, and then will contrast this practice with God's test of Abraham.
- *The thesis takes an arguable stance:* Abraham's near sacrifice of Isaac is different.

Where does it go?

The paper should open with a short introduction of one or two paragraphs that introduce and/or describe the general elements of the argument, moving from broad to narrow. The thesis is the narrowest point of the introduction, setting up the in depth presentation of the argument.

A brief, direct introductory paragraph with a clear, specific thesis:

Jeremiah chapter 20 shows a low point in the prophet's life and his response to it. This chapter shows an historical and biographical event, a key prophecy, and the last of the confession passages. This confession passage, verses 7-18, present controversial material which some scholars believe to be a blasphemy on Jeremiah's part. **Jeremiah's prayers are not blasphemy, but a passionate outpouring of his deepest emotions to the Lord.**

- *The subject of the paper is:* Evaluating the meaning of the prophet's prayers in a contested passage.
- *The order of the paper:* The introduction points to several kinds of evidence within the passage (prophetic message intertwined with personal lament) which need to be evaluated between competing claims of blasphemy versus honest painful self-expression.
- *The thesis takes an arguable stance:* The prophet's painful laments are not blasphemous.

Suggestion?

Write the thesis statement three or four different ways, and ask someone which is clearest. Also ask what they think the thesis statement means and what you are trying to argue.

What's next?

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