

# Thesis Statements: An Introduction

A strong thesis statement can help guide your writing process as well as your reader's train of thought. But what constitutes a strong thesis statement? Traditionally, it is defined as a unique claim or position that you can argue and back up with evidence. There are also some looser, more creative ways to think about thesis statements.

## The Persuasive Thesis

The purpose of a traditional, persuasive thesis is to establish a clear position or argument and to give a sense of how that argument will be made. Here are three examples:

*War is always unjust – in any war, the powerless are killed and the powerful rewarded.*

*Seurat questioned the class assumptions Manet took for granted – while Manet was painting aristocrats in their boudoirs, Seurat was out in the city painting the working class at play.*

*In its subject matter, its mode of representation, indeed, even its mode of presentation, the work of Janice Gurney is a project of great metaleptical complexity and authorial ambiguity.*

Notice how the above examples are specific and precise enough that a reader can't simply ignore them as common knowledge or baseless opinion. This specificity is achieved partly because each thesis contains not only a claim, but an indication of the logic or evidence from which the claim is built.

Because it contains this sense of logic, the thesis sets up expectations for what is to follow. In the third example, for instance, we would expect a) some background on Gurney and why she is interesting; b) how her work uses subject matter, representation, and presentation; and c) how this adds up to "metaleptical complexity and authorial ambiguity." Here, the thesis acts as a mini road- map, guiding the reader. If the essay deviates too far from the map, the reader may get lost.

## The Open Thesis

Your thesis does not have to be persuasive – many texts are not meant to convince the reader of anything, but rather to describe, question, or explore ideas. For these kinds of texts, your "thesis" needs only to give the reader a sense of what a text will and will not do. For example:

*What effect did the invention of the electric light bulb have on painting? This question cannot be answered definitively, but we can propose several compelling possibilities.*

*The purpose of this paper is not to interpret the meaning of the Javanese trance dance, but simply to observe several of the finer points distinguishing it from similar practices in Bali.*

*I want to tell you about Alice Walker's writing and its relationship to my sculpture and installation.*

## The Rough Thesis

Whatever type of thesis you choose, it is important to understand that you don't need to know your thesis right away. As you pursue your brainstorming and research, your thesis will develop. Many essays actually start with a curiosity, a question, a proposal – what we sometimes call a rough thesis.

A rough thesis doesn't have to be accurate or precise, it just needs to get you going. It's a way of guiding your research, asking productive questions about your topic, brainstorming ideas, and experimenting with different logical structures. (For more on these structures, please see our handout on Outlines.)

You should also give yourself permission to change your rough thesis as you go along. This means you don't need to write your introduction until quite late in the writing process, after you've sorted out your arguments and solidified your thesis.

## Your Next Thesis

When you begin your next piece of writing, consider what you want it to do:

### Y N

- Convince someone of something
- Propose new ideas
- Ask questions and suggest possible answers
- Describe and explore an idea
- Experiment with concepts and language

Given the nature of your writing project, what do you want your thesis to do?

### Y N

- Make a strong claim for which I will then provide arguments and evidence
- State a goal for my research
- Propose a solution to a problem
- Link one idea with another
- Suggest various possibilities
- Identify a topic and establish my perspective
- Simply identify a topic
- Ask a question that may or may not have an answer
- Nothing at all (I don't need a thesis for a poem!)

#### *Bonus Tip:*

You may be able to use your instructor's assignment sheet to help generate a rough thesis. Does it indicate a potential topic? Maybe you can refine that topic into a focused direction of research. Does it contain a question? Maybe the answer to the question makes a good thesis statement.