

Kenyon's WCC Presents a Guide On:
Writing a Strong Thesis Statement

Strong thesis statements are *key* because they clarify for a reader what exactly the writer is focusing on in his, her, or their paper. It lets the reader know what stance the author is taking if it's an argumentative essay, what claim the writer is making if it's an analytical paper, or what area the writer is studying if it's a research essay.

Let's look at some **important things** to know about thesis statements:

- They are located at the *end of the introduction* of the paper in American college essays.
- They are used as a means of *mapping out* what topic/ theme/ idea the paper explores in detail.
- They help to keep the paper *organized*, the ideas *flowing*, and the readers *connected* to the points you are making.

Let's now consider some **misconceptions** about thesis statements:

- They should only be one (1) sentence. False! While they're often thought of as a single sentence, this misconception can cause issues when you start to write longer papers. *The longer a paper is, the longer the thesis statement might be as well*; it can easily jump to two (2) or more sentences.
- They cannot be changed as you edit your paper. False! As you write, find and refine your research/ evidence, and grow towards a deeper understanding of what your paper is arguing, analyzing, or explaining, *you SHOULD expect to change your thesis statement*.
- They should always have three (3) parts. False! Many people write what we call the "three-part thesis," showing what three things will be focused on in their paper. While this style is great for papers you write quickly—say as part of an essay exam—at the college level, *we expect more thought-provoking connections*. Let's look at how to do that work next section.

Crafting a **thesis statement with tension**:

It's useful to learn how to craft a thesis statement with tension. Instead of writing the "three-part thesis," a thesis statement with tension allows readers to examine a problem, issue, or situation and engage in critical thinking. So, what is a thesis with tension and what is one without? If you consider the below charted examples, you'll notice how much more specific the second is. You'll also notice it sets up a discussion (including counterarguments) that the paper can expand upon. And, you may even see that it still contains parts of the original thesis, allowing you to explore your ideas more fully as you revise your paper!

Type:	Description:	Example Thesis:
<i>Without Tension</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Thesis is vague; doesn't address a problem within the text(s). • People can easily agree with your points • The few counterarguments are easily dismissed & can fit in a paragraph 	Without tension: COVID-19 is bad. (Who will disagree with this point? Even if there are counterarguments, they won't be easy to disprove.)
<i>With Tension</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It examines a problem with the text(s). • There will be counterarguments and disagreements • The counterarguments must be addressed and evidence must be offered to discredit them. 	With tension: COVID-19 is bad because it exposes disparities in American healthcare. (Now, your counterarguments can look at what disparities existed before COVID and what new ones it exposed.)

One last point. There are several **types**¹ of thesis statements. Consider the following:

Argumentative—it makes a case. That's the biggest difference between a thesis and a topic — a topic is something like “illness in literature.” That's not a case, only a general area. A thesis, on the other hand, makes a specific case, *it tries to prove something*. One way to tell a thesis from a topic: if it doesn't have an active verb, it's almost certainly still a topic.

- Example: Critics often overlook illness in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in favor of the more obvious abolitionist rhetoric.
 - Now you have an active verb, “overlook,” that allows you craft an argument about what critics *should* do instead.

Controversial—that doesn't mean something like “Abortionists should be shot” or “Donald J. Trump's election was illegitimate” — it means that it *has to be possible for an intelligent person to disagree with your thesis*. If everyone agrees on first sight, your thesis is too obvious, and not worth writing about. It also has to be something you can reasonably argue about: it's not enough merely to give an unsupported opinion.

- Example: Donald J. Trump's election caused Americans to debate the need for the electoral college.
 - Now, you can create an argument that people who are well informed on the subject can examine and debate by looking at polls, statistics, and even opinion pieces based on your professor's preferences.

Analytical, not evaluative—a college English analytical paper isn't always the place to praise or blame works of literature! Thesis statements without tension will not address specific examples or passages, like “*Passing* is an enduring portrayal of mental illness versus wellness” or “*The Grapes of Wrath* isn't successful in its choice of narrative techniques.” Thesis statements with tension, on the other hand, will open your readers up to looking at specific examples you provide and analyze.

- Example: In *Passing*, as Irene's inner turmoil escalates due to her proximity to Clare, it causes her mental state to decline, highlighting the tenuous relationship between illness and wellness.
 - Now, you can explore specific instances of turmoil in relation to Clare to analyze what the text is showing us about illness and wellness.

About the readings, not the real world—never forget that fiction is fiction and, if you're in an English class, you're sometimes tasked with focusing exclusively on a fiction work in assignments like close readings that don't often require outside sources. Thus, it's important to remember that many fictional works are unreliable guides to the real world outside the texts, and it's dangerous to talk about, for example, Renaissance attitudes toward race based *only* on your reading of *Othello*. If you have a paper assigned that requires no outside sources, focus on your primary source. In the example below, it's *Othello*.

- Example: *Othello* provides one author's perspective on race during the Renaissance.
 - Now you've narrowed your topic enough to just focus on what hints Shakespeare provides about race in his play.

Specific—it's not enough to deal in vague generalities. Some students want to write their paper on humankind, or on illness, or on another general topic. All are far too ambiguous to produce a good paper. You need to investigate your texts and make a claim based on what you're reading and/or researching.

¹ Please note that not all of these components will be in every thesis statement you write. A *lot* of the style of thesis statements depends on the genre of essay you must write. For example, an argumentative essay is likely to have an argumentative, specific, and controversial statement but might not have components of an analytical or about the readings statement.

- Example: COVID-19 is bad because it exposes disparities in American healthcare.
 - Now your readers know that, based on the research/ reading you've done, you are going to explain these disparities and make us understand.

Well supported—the key to writing a good paper is having a well-supported thesis statement. A thesis that meets these goals answers the “so what?” question, therefore explaining to the reader why the topic is important to address and why the reader should care about the argument the writer is making.

- Example: Reading *What the Eyes Don't See* offers a first-person perspective on the Flint, MI crisis.
 - Now you can spend the paper sharing with your readers the support for your claim.

Useful resources:

- Purdue OWL: <https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/544/03/>
- Rutgers, J. Lynch: <http://andromeda.rutgers.edu/~jlynch/EngPaper/thesis.html>

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