

Developing a Thesis Statement

A thesis is a short statement that suggests an **argument** or your **perspective** on your topic and/or focus. A thesis should be **significant, interesting**, and be **manageable** for the assignment or the paper you are writing. Your thesis should also reflect *your specific contribution* to the understanding of the subject. Finally, it should contain a **claim** about the topic that you can **explain and justify**. Think of the thesis as the road map for the paper; in other words, it tells the reader what to expect from the rest of the paper.

Keep in mind that a thesis will have different purposes depending both on the **topic** and the **discipline** in which you are writing. A thesis for a literature class will be different from a thesis for a scientific paper. It may be used to **categorize** or **define, persuade** or **convince, demonstrate cause-effect** or **correlation**, reveal a **resemblance** or **parallel** between cases, **evaluate** or **critically examine, propose** or **create** new policies, or **address ethical issues**.

There are several ways to create a thesis:

- Generate a list of questions about the topic. Pick the question that interests you most and develop an answer for that question.
- Look at any aspects of the topic that you do not fully understand – what causes the difficulty or confusion?
- Free-write. Write down random thoughts on the topic as they come into your head until you come up with an interesting avenue of investigation.
- Try to move from the general to the specific. The more specific you can make your thesis, the better.

Examples of moving from a topic to a thesis:

These examples show what the development of a thesis might look like moving from a vague idea to a specific statement that can be explained and justified.

Example 1 - Topic: The novel *Heart of Darkness* by Joseph Conrad

In this example, the thesis is based on the author's reading of a literary source.

Vague Generalization: Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* describes the beginnings of European commerce in Africa.

Question: What does the novel suggest about the relationship between Europe and Africa?

General Concept: The novel represents a symbolic journey that reveals how Europeans imagined themselves to be on a civilizing mission to Africa, but they were actually savagely exploiting the Africans.

Specific Thesis: The narrator's account of the self-restraint exercised by the cannibals reveals that the most seemingly savage of Africans are more moral than the supposedly civilized Europeans.

Example 2 – Topic: The environment and pollution

In this case, the thesis will be developed based on non-fiction, reliable resources instead of one novel or a set of works by an author.

Vague Generalization: The use of gasoline pollutes the air.

Question: What alternatives are available to the use of gasoline?

General Concept: The development of solar-powered or electric engines would reduce the use of gasoline and improve air quality.

Specific Thesis: The vast amounts of money used to protect American sources of oil in the Middle East should be used instead to develop the technology necessary to replace gas-powered vehicles.

After you have developed a potential thesis, asking yourself the following questions will help you evaluate the strength of your thesis:

- **Do I answer the question?** Re-reading the question prompt after constructing a working thesis can help you fix an argument that misses the focus of the question.
- **Have I taken a position that others might challenge or oppose?** If your thesis simply states facts that no one would, or even could, disagree with, it's possible that you are simply providing a summary, rather than making an argument.
- **Is my thesis statement specific enough?** Thesis statements that are too vague often do not have a strong argument. If your thesis contains words like "good" or "successful," see if you could be more specific: *why* is something "good"; *what specifically* makes something "successful"?
- **Does my thesis pass the "So what?" test?** If a reader's first response is likely to be "So what?" then you need to clarify your position and/or connect to a larger issue.
- **Does my essay support my thesis specifically and without wandering?** If your thesis and the body of your essay do not seem to go together, one of them has to change. It's okay to change your working thesis to reflect things you have figured out in the course of writing your paper. Remember, always reassess and revise your writing as necessary.
- **Does my thesis pass the "how and why?" test?** If a reader's first response is "how?" or "why?" your thesis may be too open-ended and lack guidance for the reader. See what you can add to give the reader a better take on your position right from the beginning.