Thesis Statements

Definition

A thesis statement appears in your essay’s introduction and tells your reader two key things:

1. What your essay will be about (your topic)
2. What you want to say about your topic (your position)

The thesis statement should clearly and concisely communicate a single, focused direction for your essay.

Example

Thesis statement: Owning a pet has several important benefits.
Topic: Owning a Pet
Position: Has several important benefits

The reader then knows that the basic topic of the essay is owning a pet, and yet, that subject alone could make for an enormously long essay that goes in all kinds of directions. For example, you could write about all the different types of pets a person could have. You could write about how to care for pets. You could write about the expenses involved in owning a pet. In fact, you could choose to write about any one of a hundred things involved in owning a pet. That’s why it’s important to narrow your topic by establishing a single, clear, focused position about it. In this case, the position is that owning a pet has several important benefits. Don’t let the word “single” in this description confuse or limit you. You shouldn’t restrict yourself to writing about just one benefit. However, writing about benefits is, in itself, a single position compared to, say, writing about drawbacks or writing about choosing the best breed of dog for you, or anything else under the topic of owning a pet.

(See page 3 for examples of more complex thesis statements or continue here with some exercises.)
Exercise

In each of the thesis statements below, underline the topic once and the viewpoint twice.

1. Our college cafeteria would be greatly improved if several changes were made.
2. Celebrities often make poor role models because of the way they talk, dress, and behave.
3. My first night as a security guard turned out to be one of the most frightening experiences of my life.
4. Reality shows have changed network television in three ways.
5. Stress in the fast-food workplace has led to serious physical, psychological, and emotional problems for employees.
6. Canadian advertisers target young people to market fashion, personal electronics, and beer.
7. Living in the city has certain advantages over living in the suburbs.

Scope

“Scope” refers to the range of your essay—whether you can adequately and effectively discuss your topic and position within the page/word count set by your instructor. Writing a great thesis statement usually requires you to take a general subject and make it smaller, narrower, and more focused (but not too small and narrow, as you’ll see in the next section, “What to Watch Out For”). The examples in the table below demonstrate how to take really general subjects and focus them into thesis statements that have adequate scope for a basic academic essay.

Examples

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>General subject</th>
<th>Focused subject/topic</th>
<th>Thesis statement (focused subject/topic + position)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Internet</td>
<td>email</td>
<td>Email is a great way to stay in touch with friends.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family</td>
<td>older sister</td>
<td>My older sister helped me overcome my shyness.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Television</td>
<td>cable stations</td>
<td>Cable stations offer more interesting kinds of programs than network TV.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College</td>
<td>studying English in college</td>
<td>Studying English at college is very different from studying English in high school.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sports</td>
<td>players’ salaries</td>
<td>High players’ salaries are bad for hockey, anger the fans, and distort the values that children are developing.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
What to Watch Out For

Watch out for 4 things that can seriously weaken your thesis statement:

1. Writing announcements instead of statements
2. Making your thesis statement too broad
3. Making your thesis statement too narrow
4. Having more than 1 idea in your thesis statement

Examples/Exercises

For each of the following pairs, identify which statement is an announcement and which is a clear, concise thesis statement that could be developed in an essay.

1. a) This essay will discuss the people you meet in exercise class.
   b) The kinds of workout clothes worn in my aerobics class identify “jocks,” “strugglers,” and “shopping fanatics.”

2. a) I made several mistakes in the process of trying to win the respect and affection of my stepson.
   b) My thesis in this essay is relationships between step-parents and stepchildren.

For each of the following pairs, identify which statement is too narrow to be developed in an essay and which statement offers a point that could be developed.

1. a) I had squash, tomatoes, and corn in my garden last summer.
   b) Vegetable gardening can be a frustrating hobby.

2. a) The main road into our town is lined with fast-food outlets.
   b) For several reasons, the number of fast-food chain outlets should not be allowed to dominate main roads.
For each of the following pairs, **identify which statement is too broad** to be developed in an essay and which statement offers a point that could be developed.

1. a) In many ways, sports are an important part of Canadian life.
   b) Widespread gambling in some Canadian cities has changed people’s lives for the worse.

2. a) Toy ads on television teach children to be greedy, competitive, and snobbish.
   b) Advertising has bad effects on all of society.

For each of the following pairs, **identify which statement presents more than one idea** and which offers a single, clear point.

1. a) Working with old people changed my stereotypes about the elderly.
   b) My life has moved in new directions since the rewarding job I had working with old people last summer.

2. a) Some of the most entertaining ads on television today are those on the cable shopping stations.
   b) Although ads on cable shopping stations are often misleading, they can still be very entertaining.