
Section Objectives:

- Students will be able to distinguish the difference between topics and thesis statements in a written response.
- Students will be able to determine whether the content in a text is relevant to the thesis statement.
- Students will be able to develop an idea for a written response.

Thesis Thesis Thesis Thesis

This lesson is all about constructing and recognizing good thesis statements.

There are, generally speaking, two kinds of writing done in academic and professional settings. The first is most like a report. In this type, the writer provides information about a given subject without offering his or her own opinion. This is the kind of writing most often seen in newspapers and magazines. The second kind of writing provides the writer's opinion, analysis, or evaluation of a given subject. This kind of writing is very common in academic or professional writing. What differentiates the two kinds of writing is the presence of a thesis statement. A **thesis statement** is a one- or two-sentence summary of the main argument of a paper. A **topic**, on the other hand, is the main subject of the paper. The topic of a paper might be *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, by Ernest Hemingway, but the thesis statement makes an argument about the topic. For example, *Ernest Hemingway's novel For Whom the Bell Tolls demonstrates what true masculinity looks like through its depiction of the main character.*

Good thesis statements have four characteristics: They are argumentative, controversial, specific, and analytic or evaluative.

Good thesis statements are argumentative.

A good thesis statement makes a case about something. If it does not, it is not a thesis statement. Read the following sentence: *Ernest Hemingway's For Whom the Bell Tolls is set during the Spanish Civil War.*

This is not a thesis statement because it is not argumentative; it is just a statement of fact -- the book *is*, indeed, set during the Spanish Civil War.

A good thesis statement makes a case: *Ernest Hemingway's For Whom the Bell Tolls is set during the Spanish Civil War to demonstrate that war is a terrible evil no matter where or why it takes place.*

Good thesis statements are controversial.

This does not mean that good thesis statements say something outrageous or offensive. Instead, it simply means that good thesis statements can inspire debate. If everyone agrees with a thesis statement, it is not controversial and thus, not a good thesis statement. For example, the following statement is not controversial: *Ernest Hemingway's For Whom the Bell Tolls depicts the horrors of war*. Most reasonable people would agree with that statement, and so it is not controversial.

If no reasonable person can disagree with a thesis statement, then it is not controversial and needs to be revised. A revision of the thesis statement above, to make it more controversial, would be *Ernest Hemingway's For Whom the Bell Tolls depicts the horrors of war in order to convince readers that war is never necessary*.

Good thesis statements are specific.

Good thesis statements must be narrowly focused. If the thesis statement is too broad, the paper will require so much information that it will be difficult to write. Examine the thesis statement *Ernest Hemingway's For Whom the Bell Tolls is concerned with appropriate demonstrations of masculine honor*. This is a very broad thesis statement and, unless one is writing a twenty- or thirty-page research paper, needs to be narrowed: *Ernest Hemingway's For Whom the Bell Tolls illustrates appropriate demonstrations of masculine honor through the character of Robert Jordan and his sacrifice of love for honor*.

Good thesis statements are analytical or evaluative.

Analytical thesis statements describe how or why something is constructed. Evaluative thesis statements assess the validity or worth of the subject. Most instructors will tell you that good thesis statements should only be analytical, never evaluative. While it is true that most academic writing should be analytical, as in the examples above, it is also true that some writing can and should be evaluative. In professional situations, for example, one might be expected to produce a report evaluating a new method of doing business or piece of equipment. In this case, the thesis statement must be evaluative.

In academic settings, particularly when writing about literature, most writing should be analytical. It is rare to be asked to evaluate a text's worth -- the presumption is that it is worthy if it is being taught.

Topics versus Thesis Statements

It can be easy to confuse thesis statements and topics. One way to distinguish them is to remember that they answer separate questions. The topic answers the question *what*, as in *What is your essay about?* The thesis statement answers the question *how* or *why*. In fact, framing a thesis statement as the answer to a *how* or *why* question usually produces an excellent thesis statement. To begin to formulate a thesis statement, fill in the following statement:

I believe it is true/not true *or* important/not important that _____.

For example: *I believe it is true that texting while driving should be treated as a crime similar to drunk driving.* When beginning to write the paper, simply remove the beginning clause: *Texting while driving should be treated as a crime similar to drunk driving.*

Supporting the Thesis Statement

All of the body paragraphs of a paper should support the thesis statement. They should do this by providing evidence or examples that support the thesis statement or by addressing arguments that oppose the thesis statements. The body paragraphs should provide reasons that support the thesis statement. To begin to formulate such evidence, return to the original statement and add the word *because*:

I believe that texting while driving should be treated as a crime similar to drunk driving **because** it is just as dangerous as drunk driving, it is more common than drunk driving, and it causes more injuries than drunk driving.

Everything that comes after the *because* becomes the topic of a body paragraph. There may be additional body paragraphs; paragraphs that provide background information or that address opposing arguments may be necessary as well.

Practice

Answer the following questions with a one- or two-sentence thesis statement.

1. Who is the true villain in *Romeo and Juliet*?
2. Why are reality shows so popular?
3. Why must Harry die before he can defeat Voldemort in *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*?
4. Should Shakespeare continue to be taught in US high schools?
5. Should the government ban fast food advertisements?
6. Is the *Twilight* series a feminist series?
7. Should the United States lower the legal drinking age to 18?
8. In *The Hunger Games*, is Haymitch a good mentor?
9. Is breaking the law ever justifiable?
10. Is the character of Holden Caulfield from *The Catcher in the Rye* a good role model for teenagers?