

The Art of Argument: Developing a Thesis Statement

Definitions of "Thesis Statement"

The thesis statement is the key sentence of the student's paper on the basis of which research is done and supportive arguments are developed.

<http://unipapers.org/blog/2007/12/11/thesis-statement-definition/>

An explanation of the topic or purpose of a research paper.

<http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/thesis+statement>

A debatable point or claim.

<http://www.englishdiscourse.org/thesis.definition.html>

A thesis is "a controlling idea." The thesis is often expressed in one or two sentences called a thesis statement.

The Writer's Brief Handbook, Rosa, Eschholz and Roberts

The thesis acts as the main claim of your paper... The thesis expresses in one concise sentence the point and purpose of your essay.

Tom Johnson, Ten Steps to Writing an Essay, <http://www1.aucegypt.edu/academic/writers/thesis.htm>

A thesis statement ... is only one sentence, not two or three or more. Why? Because the thesis statement is the main point you want to make in one essay; so it should be one sentence. Frederick Crews defines an essay as "a short piece of nonfiction that tries to make a point in an interesting way." What makes it an essay is that it aims to make a point, one point. This doesn't mean that you can only make one assertion in an essay. But it means that all of the many claims you make must fit together, that they must all support or lead to a single point (claim, conclusion) that defines the whole essay. And if everything you say in an essay supports a single point or claim, then you can express that claim in a single sentence. Notice that nobody is saying that it must be a short sentence or a pretty sentence. But it must be one sentence, not two or more sentences. If you can't express the main point of your essay in one sentence, your essay probably doesn't have one point; it probably has two. And that means it should be two essays. Feel free to write them both, but one at a time.

John Tagg, 2004, <http://daphne.palomar.edu/handbook/thesis.htm>

A thesis is a position on an issue supported by a number of distinct arguments. The word "because" should be able to connect the position to the supporting arguments. Grammatically speaking, the thesis is a main clause, while the supporting arguments comprise a subordinate clause. The word "because" is a subordinating conjunction used to connect the two clauses. Together, these two clauses produce a thesis statement.

Art Lightstone, www.newlearner.com

Where Should the Thesis Statement Appear?

The research paper thesis statement should appear in the introductory paragraph of the research paper. Some students make the mistake of thinking that the thesis statement should appear in the conclusion of the paper and that it is a summation of what appears in the paper. On the contrary, a thesis statement is what supports the rest of the paper, not what results from the paper.

<http://www.essaytown.com/writing/research-paper-thesis-statement>

Unless you have a compelling reason to relocate the thesis from the traditional place, put it at the end of your introductory paragraph. Readers anticipate and read closely your thesis, and they want to find a polished statement there.

Tom Johnson, Ten Steps to Writing an Essay, <http://www1.aucegypt.edu/academic/writers/thesis.htm>

An article's thesis statement is usually in the first or second paragraphs, after some description or discussion of the article's context or the gaps in the discipline's knowledge the article is addressing.

The Writer's Brief Handbook, Rosa, Eschholz and Roberts

Types of Papers

An **analytical** paper breaks down an issue or an idea into its component parts, evaluates the issue or idea, and presents this breakdown and evaluation to the audience.

An **expository** (explanatory, exposition) paper explains something to the audience.

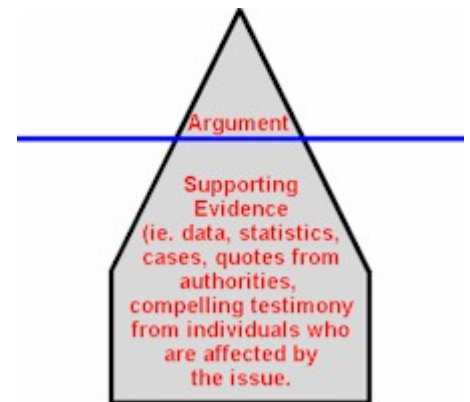
An **argumentative** (position) paper makes a claim about a topic and justifies this claim with specific evidence. The claim could be an opinion, a policy proposal, an evaluation, a cause-and-effect statement, or an interpretation. The goal of the argumentative paper is to convince the audience that the claim is true based on the evidence provided.

Note: In law class, we only write argumentative (aka "position") papers.

Advice

Probably the best pointer I can give you when developing a thesis is to make your overall position a simple one, and then be sure that you can firmly prove every critical point associated with your supporting arguments. (The writer's personal opinion is *not* considered reasonable support.)

Assume that you are speaking to a hostile audience that is motivated to find a weakness in your thesis. Thus, a good thesis should be like an iceberg (only 1/8th of an iceberg sticks out of the water). Thus, you should have a very small, precise argument positioned at the top of a great deal of supporting evidence.



Contrary to popular belief, the objective of a thesis is not to express your opinion regarding an issue. Rather, your objective is to convince others that your opinion is correct. In the end, you cannot simply ask the reader to accept your argument; you must prove your argument!

The Introduction

The introduction should be contained within a single paragraph, and accomplish four tasks:

- i) get the reader's attention (known as the "**hook**"),
- ii) outline the issue that serves as the context for the argument (known simply as the "**issue**"),
- iii) present the writer's position on the issue (popularly known as the "**thesis**"),
- iv) present the ideas in support of the writer's position (known as the "**supporting arguments**").

i) Hook: Get the reader's attention!

The first goal of your introduction is to grab the reader's attention. Wake the reader up, rouse the emotions, and generate some interest about the topic. To grab the reader's attention, you might consider presenting:

- an interesting fact
- a surprising or even shocking piece of information
- an exciting or thought-provoking quote
- an intriguing or upsetting paradox
- a provocative or even disturbing case

For example, if the essay is going to argue that the Highway Traffic Act should apply to private parking lots, then the introduction could grab the reader's attention with a quick description of a case wherein a reckless driver drove through a stop sign and tore someone else's car door off. Yet, when the police arrived, the victim learned that the reckless driver could not be charged under the Highway Traffic Act, and that the victim's insurance would have to pay for the damage.

ii) Issue: Establish the context for the argument.

Explain, in no more than three sentences, the fundamental issue addressed in the essay. For example, if the essay is going to argue that the Highway Traffic Act should apply to private parking lots, then the introduction should outline the part of the Highway Traffic Act that states where the Act does and does not apply. The introduction might also outline the basic logic behind where the Highway Traffic Act applies.

iii) Thesis: State the writer's position on the issue.

As outlined in the first two pages of this resource, the entire introduction should lead toward the presentation of an arguable assertion, or "thesis" – whereby the writer takes a stand on an issue. The thesis should appear at the end of the introduction so that your reader is very clear as to the essay's position on the issue being examined.

iv) Supporting Arguments: Outline the ideas that will be used in support of the thesis.

The introduction should not explore the fine details of the thesis. Rather, the introduction should outline the basic supporting arguments. (The details associated with the supporting arguments belong in the body of the essay.)

For example, if the essay is going to argue that the Highway Traffic Act should apply to mall parking lots, then the introduction should outline two or three supporting arguments for this position. In such a case, the thesis statement could read: "The Highway Traffic Act should be amended so as to apply to private parking lots because drivers are tending to ignore posted traffic signs in these areas, and a significant number of collisions are occurring as a result." The reader now knows that the first objective of the essay's body will be to prove that *drivers tend to ignore posted traffic signs* in parking lots, and the second objective of the essay's body is to prove that a *significant number of collisions* are occurring in parking lots. (Naturally, this will oblige the writer to provide substantive empirical support for these claims within the body of the essay.)

One Final Note: Essay writers in senior school or university courses should avoid saying "I will discuss . . ." or "I intend to argue . . ." or "The purpose of this essay is to..." These approaches are generally intended to help guide novice essay writers through the essay writing process.