

Essay and Paragraph Development Tutorial:

Tutorial #26:

Thesis Statements and Topic Sentences

Creating Thesis Statements
Creating Topic Sentences

Writing Center
English 800 Center

All notes and exercises can be done on separate sheets of paper, which you should bring to your conference with an instructor in the center.

As you work through the tutorial, make sure to see an instructional aide at the front desk in the Writing Center or English 800 Center if you have any questions or difficulties.

I. Thesis Statements

WHAT IS A THESIS STATEMENT?

The main point or controlling idea of any essay is its thesis. It is an **arguable assertion—your opinion or position**—on your topic and is, without question, the most important sentence in an academic essay. Having a thesis is useful to both the writer and the reader since **its primary function is to organize, predict, control, and define the entire paper.**

In many cases, a thesis sentence will not only outline the essay's main point, but also predict and control the direction that the paper is going to take. The thesis thus serves as a *contract between the reader and the writer* because it promises both the central purpose of the essay and the structure of the paper as well. It gives the essay a sense of unity and helps keep the writer focused while writing. Generally located **at the end of the introduction**, the thesis is usually only one or two sentences (although in a longer paper the thesis may be stated in several sentences).

WHAT IS A THESIS STATEMENT GOOD FOR?

A good thesis statement

- is more than a statement of fact and makes an arguable assertion about a topic; it states the position a writer has reached about the topic and is usually at the end of the introduction
- is a complete sentence that expresses an opinion or an idea about a topic that can be supported or more fully developed in the body of the essay
- summarizes the whole essay in one sentence and promises or reflects the essay's main purpose or "so what"
- provides the structure or unifying framework for the scope, focus, and direction of the essay
- predicts, controls, and obligates and serves as a contract between the reader and the writer
- limits the topic to be narrow enough to make it manageable so it can be fully supported but not too broad for the scope of an essay

HOW DO I DEVELOP A THESIS STATEMENT?

While the **topic is what the paper is about**, the **thesis defines your opinion or position on that particular topic.** For this reason, it is important to develop a **tentative or working thesis statement** early in composing your essay because it will help guide your thoughts and possible research. When you have decided on your essay's topic, you can begin to develop your thesis by examining your topic, perhaps doing some exploratory reading and writing, or reflecting and pulling from class discussions or conversations with classmates and friends.

A writer develops a thesis **by asking questions about the topic** and by focusing on a basic point or question which the topic raises. The answer to such a question will be your thesis: what you think about a specific topic. The topic is your question, and the thesis your answer to that question.

For this reason, as you write your paper, your thesis statement may change. In fact, in its initial stages, a thesis statement usually is rough and works only as a tentative planning tool. Writing promotes thinking. As you write, you will discover precisely what you think about the topic, and your thesis will probably change. As you continue writing, a more specific, complex, and **final thesis** will emerge as you narrow your focus. Remember that **writing is rewriting**, a continual process that takes many revisions. As you write and do more research, you might even notice that you have lost your original thesis as you find evidence that does not support your thesis. This is absolutely normal since as you write you often reach deeper insights about your topic and realize that your thesis statement has to be more complex to match the supporting ideas and evidence that you have provided.

Don't be surprised if in early drafts of an essay, your thesis statement ends up *at the end of a paper* as you attempt to answer your questions about the topic. Such thesis statements can then be **revised, polished, and moved** since most thesis statements appear usually at the **end of the introductory paragraphs**.

THESIS AS A STRATEGY FOR THE WRITER AND READER

A thesis is both a writer and a reader strategy...

For the writer, the thesis statement is a writer strategy because it

- serves as a planning tool and one-sentence summary of the writer's opinions about a topic
- helps the writer determine the paper's real focus and lets the writer know if an essay is wandering off in too many directions
- becomes an organizational framework for the topic sentences
- provides the writer with something to define, prove, and develop

For readers, the thesis statement is a reader strategy because it

- serves as a contract with the writer, engaging and allowing readers to follow through the paper
- keeps readers focused on the argument so they know what to expect in the essay
- allows readers to identify the main ideas and see exactly how each topic sentence connects to the thesis
- offers enough detail for readers to grasp the writer's argument

A thesis, thus, lets your reader know what to expect from your paper and allows your reader to decide how well you've accomplished what you've set out to do. In fact, some thesis statements might even give you an outline for your paper.

For example, it shouldn't be too much trouble to organize an essay with the following thesis statement:

Attending a community college like CSM makes sense since the cost is low and the quality of instruction is high.

TOPIC	OPINION	REASONS OR SUPPORTING EVIDENCE
Attending a community college like CSM	makes sense	since the cost is low and the quality of instruction is high.

With such a thesis, a writer would first discuss the relative low cost and then describe the excellent education one can obtain at colleges such as ours! This is a common form for a thesis. The writer first **states the topic** and then **the arguable assertion or opinion** about it, then adds the **reasons or supporting evidence**. The reasons are usually introduced by joining words such as the following: for, as, because, since, due to. The supporting evidence answers the "so what?"

Exercise 1

For each of the following thesis statements, identify **the topic, the opinion or arguable assertion**, and if applicable, **the supporting evidence or reasons**.

Example: Cell phone use while driving should be banned, for it creates an unsafe environment not only for drivers using cell phones but also for other people in nearby vehicles.

TOPIC	OPINION	REASONS OR SUPPORTING EVIDENCE
Cell phone use while driving	should be banned,	for it creates an unsafe environment not only for drivers using them but also for other people in nearby vehicles.

1. Pornography is harmful to society because it depersonalizes and dehumanizes sexuality and it is degrading and oppressive to women.
2. Violent video games should be made illegal, for it might incite some people to commit violent acts.
3. An after-school job can be harmful to teenagers as working not only reduces opportunities for social and recreational time but also takes time valuable time away from schoolwork.
4. Marijuana should be legalized since legalization would eliminate the black market for that drug.
5. Welfare benefits for single mothers should not be eliminated, for the benefits are needed to prevent hunger and poverty among our country's most helpless citizens—our children.

THESIS DEVELOPMENT GUIDELINES

HOW DO I KNOW A TROUBLESOME THESIS WHEN I SEE ONE?

1. A troublesome thesis usually has no “so what” or main purpose. Instead of providing an arguable assertion, it is **merely a statement of fact**. Some writers might confuse factual introductions to an essay with the thesis.

Example: Henri Matisse was considered, with Picasso, one of the two great artists of the twentieth century.

Better: Henri Matisse is superior to Picasso because of Matisse’s brilliant ability to shift between realism, abstraction, Fauvism, and classicism.

2. A troublesome thesis can be **too broad or too general**. If the writer is trying to write an essay and not a book, it may be on too large an issue for a writer to develop thoroughly in a short essay.

Example: Homelessness in San Francisco is a serious problem in today’s society.

Better: The problems with homelessness in San Francisco could be resolved if the Board of Supervisors would agree on some of the proposed solutions.

Example: Crime is too prevalent in our society.

Better: Our judicial system should give tougher sentences to criminals who are repeat offenders.

3. A troublesome thesis can be **too specific**. If your thesis is too specific then you will have too little to write about. It may be only on one aspect of an issue, one part of a topic, or the first main point. Examine all your main points for a larger, umbrella sentence.

Example: Getting into Disneyland on the Saturday during Labor Day weekend can be difficult.

Better: Getting into Disneyland can be difficult, depending on the time of year.

4. A troublesome thesis expresses **more than one main idea**. If your thesis makes more than one point, your paper may be confusing to your reader. A thesis which clearly expresses one controlling idea will focus your paper.

Example: The proposed transit system is worth examining, but it has several weaknesses, so it should be run only on an experimental basis for a limited period of a couple of years.

Better: The proposed transit system should be run on an experimental basis for a limited period of a couple of years.

5. A troublesome thesis is a **fragment**; a good thesis statement is expressed in a complete sentence.

Example: How life is in New York after September 11th.

Better: After September 11th, the city of New York tends to have more cases of post-traumatic disorder than other areas of the United States and rightfully so.

6. A troublesome thesis is **in the form of a question** instead of a sentence or arguable assertion. It does not take a position.

Example: Should an eighteen year old have the right to drink?

Better: Anyone old enough to fight a war should be old enough to drink.

7. A troublesome thesis contains phrases such as “I think,” “I believe,” or “in my opinion,” which weaken the statement.

Example: GOP candidate Bill Simon and Governor Gray Davis may appear to be different, but in my opinion they are very similar.

Better: To the unsuspecting voter, GOP candidate Bill Simon and Governor Gray Davis might seem to offer a choice in the gubernatorial race; however, in fact they take very similar stands on certain issues.

8. A troublesome thesis is expressed in **vague language**. Try to avoid vague terms such as “things,” “neat,” “interesting,” “nice,” “good,” and “great.”

Example: Negative things have resulted from religion being taught in our schools.

Better: Religion as part of the school curriculum should be avoided because a person’s religious beliefs are highly personal and require individual commitment.

Exercise 2

Keeping in mind the above thesis development guidelines, analyze the following statements and identify the reason(s) you think they do or do not work as good thesis statements.

Example: Drug use is a serious problem in today's world.

Analysis: Not a good thesis.

Expresses a point that everyone would probably agree with; it does not state an assertion that anyone would want to argue. The statement is also too broad, and it contains the vague phrase "in today's world." Avoid using such vague or fuzzy phrases.

Example: This has been the worst summer in the world for bad weather—droughts, floods, and huge fires have besieged the planet all at the same time.

Analysis: Not a good thesis.

Merely a statement of fact leaving the writer with nothing to argue or support.

1. Television has had a serious impact in today's society.
2. During a recent episode of *Law and Order*, two people were killed, three were stabbed, and four were badly beaten.
3. An evaluation of the benefits of Prozac
4. In this essay I am going to talk about the potential problems if the administration restructures the Social Security program.
5. Have you ever considered why people are so rude when they drive, especially at rush hour?
6. Christopher Reeves' physical disability has not prevented him from becoming an advocate for research on spinal cord injury, and his story should be made into a book.
7. How to grow beautiful orchids.
8. I think it is interesting how many people enjoy horror movies.
9. If you don't care about spending a little bit more money, I think you'll agree that dinner is a much more satisfying experience at *The House of Prime Rib* than at *Sizzler's*.

10. This paper is an attempt to tell you about how I felt viewing the devastation at Ground Zero in New York.

Exercise 3

Again keeping in mind the above thesis development guidelines, analyze the following troublesome statements, but this time suggest a revision for each of them.

Example: In *Gone with the Wind*, Scarlett O'Hara is a proud, headstrong woman.

Analysis: Not a good thesis.
Simply a statement of fact.

Better: Scarlett's headstrong nature is the primary reason why Rhett Butler both loves and leaves her.

Example: Romeo and Juliet die because each one unfortunately thinks the other is dead.

Analysis: Not a good thesis.
Another statement of fact that no one would disagree with; it does not state an assertion that needs to be argued.

Better: Shakespeare uses Romeo's and Juliet's needless deaths as metaphors to show the pettiness of feuding families and countries.

Example: The thesis of this paper is the difficulty of solving our economic problems.

Analysis: Not a good thesis.
This is simply an announcement of the subject or topic of the essay, not a thesis.

Better: Solving our country's economic problems is a lot more difficult than most people believe.

1. Advertisers like to use beautiful models in their ads to sell their products.
2. This paper will consider the reasons why detective fiction is worth reading.
3. I believe that the federal government should give more money to breast cancer

research.

4. Not much has been done to save the condor from extinction.
5. Writing an essay can be a fairly easy process.
6. **In my opinion, the Writing Center at CSM is a great resource for students.**

Show that you've mastered this skill

In the space below, write in your own words what you've learned about thesis statements and explain how you will use what you've learned in your own essays.

Exercise 4

Choose two of the following subjects and narrow each one down to two topics that might work for a 3-page essay. Write one possible thesis statement for each topic.

Example: SPORTS

Topics: College athletics
Baseball

Thesis statements:

Athletes in college should be required to maintain a decent grade-point average in order to participate in school sports.

Baseball has decreased in popularity because people seem to be more interested in violent sports such as wrestling.

1. Terrorism
2. Affirmative action
3. Politics
4. Holidays
5. Pop culture
6. Music
7. Reality television
8. School testing
9. Parenting
10. Nutrition

II. Topic Sentences

WHAT IS A TOPIC SENTENCE?

As you know, college students are required in their classes to express their ideas effectively in coherent, unified, and well-developed essays. Each essay is composed of several paragraphs, and each paragraph should express a different point or aspect of the thesis. Usually the first sentence of a paragraph but sometimes the last sentence or in another position in the paragraph, the **topic sentence** identifies for the reader **the main point of a paragraph**. If this sounds similar to the preceding section on the thesis statement, that's because the thesis is essential to an essay just as the topic sentence is the unifying force in a paragraph. An effective topic sentence must therefore be clearly related to the essay's thesis statement.

The topic sentence in a paragraph functions much like the thesis does in an essay; it sets up a reader's expectations about what the controlling idea is. In fact, topic sentences often act like mini thesis statements. Like a thesis statement, a topic sentence makes a claim of some sort, but unlike the thesis which is more general, it attempts to explain only one specific aspect of the thesis. Also, as in the case of the thesis statement, when the topic sentence makes a claim, the sentences in the paragraph which follow must explain, describe, or prove it in some way.

WHAT IS A TOPIC SENTENCE GOOD FOR?

A good topic sentence

- is a complete sentence
- can be located anywhere in the paragraph (although it is often the first sentence)
- accurately summarizes the main point of a paragraph in one sentence and reflects the paragraph's main purpose
- serves as a contract between the reader and the writer
- promises that the writer will stick to the idea it expresses throughout the paragraph
- is not too narrow and broad enough to require further explanation or evidence

In a thesis, the writer first **states the topic** (what the paragraph is about) and then **the arguable assertion or opinion** about that topic. Similarly, a good topic sentence usually has two parts, **the topic** and **the key words** that state the writer's assertion or opinion about the topic. Consider the following sentence.

Racquetball is a superior sport for several reasons.

TOPIC **KEY WORDS**

In this sentence, racquetball is the topic because it is what the paragraph is about. "Superior sport" are the key words because they state an opinion about the topic, racquetball. The topic sentence identifies and limits what will be discussed in the paragraph. In such a paragraph, the writer would have to identify through **personal experience, examples, facts, or reasons** why racquetball is superior to other sports.

Exercise 5

Directions: Read each paragraph below and select the sentence which best expresses the topic sentence or main idea. For each topic sentence, circle **its topic** and underline its **key words**. Also notice some of the ways the writers have developed each paragraph through **personal experience, examples, facts, or reasons**.

Paragraph #1

..... 1The best case I ever came across of a compulsive-obsessive person was one of my old elementary school teachers. 2She was a person who loved to save things. 3She had all the *Time* magazines that she had ever read since 1950, stacked according to weeks. 4Each stack was bound by blue string. 5She even saved her old toothbrushes. 6She had her collection of toothbrushes tucked away in her hall closet. 7She was also a person who liked to label everything. 8She'd spend hours putting labels on each drawer, shelf, and closet in the classroom. 9Once someone went into the closet and noticed a shelf with bright orange paper, and there, on the front of the shelf, was a label identifying it as "Bright Orange Paper."

Paragraph #2

..... 1There are several ways for people to view money. 2First is the person whose dollars disappear in mere moments. 3To this person, a savings account is like a straitjacket. 4The spender lives only in the present and can't plan ahead financially. 5Next is the individual who hoards pennies like rubies. 6The hoarder may be wealthy but remains unable to relish the pleasures that money makes possible. 7This person lives in the future, a future that never arrives. 8More common is the person who likes to save but can occasionally spend without anxiety. 9This person is rooted in the present but prepared for days to come.

Paragraph #3

..... 1Basketball is appealing for several reasons. 2Basketball is fast, exciting, and unpredictable; a large lead can be lost in a single minute, and many games are decided by a single point. 3Because the basketball team has few members, I can become acquainted with each player's personality. 4I also love watching a player leap gracefully to the basket and dunk the ball. 5But most of all, I love basketball because it gives me a chance to yell at the refs.

Paragraph #4

..... 1E-mail can suck up much of a person's free time. 2According to 2001 surveys in *MacWorld* and *PC Week* magazines, eight out of ten people spend more than one hour daily on e-mail. 3In fact, one of my friends, a computer aficionado, tells me that she has spent up to four hours per day reading and sending e-mail messages. 4One reason for the time drain is that every day tons of bulk e-mail or spam arrives in most e-mail accounts and must be deleted. 5In addition, wading through old e-mails for important instructions or information can also involve hours. 6I myself have found that e-mailing friends and family is so easy that I tend to write many unnecessary messages to many more people than I would write otherwise, spending free time with e-mail rather than going to the movies or reading a book.

Exercise 6

The Headless Paragraph

Paragraphs without topic sentences are “headless” paragraphs. While they may contain a lot of details and supporting evidence, they are difficult to follow because we don’t know what point the writer is trying to make.

Below are several “headless” paragraphs. Add a topic sentence for each paragraph and be sure that the “head” or topic sentence is general enough to sum up the paragraph’s main points yet specific enough to be appropriate for the supporting details.

1.

Getting there in itself was an ordeal because there was a lot of traffic on 280. Once I got there, I drove around the campus for what seemed to be hours looking for a parking space. Next I had to figure out on the campus map where I was and which direction I should go to find my first class. When I found the room in Building 16, I noticed a sign on the classroom door saying that the class had been moved to another building, which I couldn’t find on the campus map. After asking another student for directions, I finally found the building. Stumbling into the classroom, I noticed some students were already getting ready to leave because class was over. I haven’t felt so lost since I was five on my first day of kindergarten.

2.

My sociology text at the campus bookstore was \$75. The same book online was \$55. The textbook required for my psychology course was \$69.99 at the campus bookstore but only \$52 online. Similarly, my biology text online was \$12 less than I would have paid for it at the bookstore. It’s mind-boggling to me after finding such deals why everyone doesn’t purchase their books online.

3.

First of all, the prices for tickets to rock concerts used to be much cheaper. For example, I remember seeing the Rolling Stones at Candlestick Park in the late 70’s when the tickets were

only about \$20 apiece. Nowadays, a ticket to see the Stones on one of their “final” tours costs over \$100. Back then, I was able to see Mick Jagger up close since I was on the field. Recently after spending so much money, I was surprised to find that I was seated in the Coliseum in one of the worst seats to see anything. Concert t-shirts are also much more expensive than they used to be. In the 70’s, I bought a couple of shirts for \$5 apiece. At the Stones’ last concert, I spent over \$35 for a shirt. Finally, and most importantly, the music can be a disappointment. Back in the 70’s, concerts were more exciting since bands would play cuts from their new albums. At the Stones’ recent concert, although the band came back for an encore and played most of their greatest hits, there were few surprises since they haven’t released a new album in some time. Unfortunately for me, as Mick once said, I know it’s only rock n’ roll but I like it. So I’ll continue to go to concerts, but they sure don’t offer the same experience they once did.

4.

When her child is hungry, she must make sure food is available. When her child is later tired and grumpy, a mother makes sure a nap or bedtime occurs. When her child is sick, she must monitor the child’s fever and dispense the appropriate medicine. But beyond these physical needs, when a child expresses a desire for independence or affection and reassurance, a responsible mother monitors her child's psychological health and responds with wisdom and balance.

5.

One day my father told me to do the laundry and vacuum the house. I did not hear exactly what he said, so I asked him to repeat it. At this point he burst out angrily, "Are you deaf?" Another time he asked my mother to go the store and purchase groceries with a fifty-dollar bill; he insisted that she spend no more than twenty dollars. She spent twenty-two dollars. As soon as he discovered she had exceeded his limit, he refused to speak to her for the rest of the day. My father even gives my older brothers a hard time with his irritable nature. One day he ordered them to return home from their dates by midnight. When they arrived back at our house ten minutes late, my father informed them that they were grounded for two weeks.

Exercise 7

Write precise topic sentences for possible paragraphs on the following topics. Be sure to provide both the subject and the key word(s).

Example:	Teenagers and drugs
Topic	Drug addiction has caused a huge increase in crimes of violence by teenagers.

1. Writing an essay effectively

Topic sentence:

2. Food service at CSM

Topic sentence:

3. Television coverage of disasters

Topic sentence:

4. Movie

Topic sentence:

5. People who irritate you

Topic sentence:

6. A favorite teacher

Topic sentence:

Exercise 8

Choose **one** of the following topics and write a detailed paragraph (one-half page **minimum**). Make sure the paragraph has an effective topic sentence and that the paragraph has enough specific details to fully develop the topic sentence.

1. Discuss what you believe are the most important traits of a good leader, explaining why these characteristics are essential.

OR

2. Should the purchase of handguns be regulated? Explain why.

OR

3. Considering the specific requirements that must be fulfilled, do you think it is easy or difficult to obtain a driver's license in California?

OR

4. Discuss the specific steps that students must complete before they can attend classes at

the College of San Mateo. Is it easy or difficult to begin college at CSM?

OR

5. Describe the best musical concert you've ever attended and why it was so special.

OR

6. Using examples that you have observed, explain how parents differ in their attitudes toward their children.

OR

7. Describe the most frightening, saddest *or* proudest experience of your life in a very detailed paragraph

OR

8. Describe how to extend the life of a car or motorcycle, showing how each step is important.

Exercise 9

Now that you have completed and corrected all of the written exercises in this tutorial, **Thesis Statements and Topic Sentences**, it is time to show what you have learned. In the following essay, circle its thesis statement, and with each paragraph, underline its topic sentence.

Although I'm happy to be in college, college life does have its drawbacks. For one thing, I can see that passing all my classes will require a lot of hard work. In addition, going to college can be expensive. Another unpleasant part of going to school is that I have to miss out on things I would love to do. But perhaps the worst part of attending college is living in the dorms. In fact, many unwitting freshman eventually discover the many troubles with living in the dorms.

For one thing privacy is a very precious commodity. Ever since I was ten, I have had my own room to retreat to whenever I needed to be alone. So it's difficult adjusting to sharing a tiny cubicle with one other person. My roommate always seems to be around. So if I want to listen to the new No Doubt album, I have to ask whether it's okay first. But if she's around, I usually can't enjoy the music because I know that she only likes hip hop and shows her resentment and judgment of my taste in music.

Another problem with living in the dorms is that such close quarters can always result in friction between roommates especially if personality clashes exist. For instance, my roommate is a big slob while I'm known as compulsively neat. So I am so tired of having to step over her piles of clothes littering the floor and hunting for my books and papers among her empty soda bottles, banana peels, and candy wrappers that are always scattered all over our desk. I'm fed up with spending any time or energy arguing with

her about having to clean up her messes when I could be using this valuable time getting schoolwork done.

Equally as bad as sharing a room with a sloppy roommate is living in a dorm with paper-thin walls through which we can hear everything going on in adjacent rooms. It always seems to be before a big test or exam that my neighbors on one side always manage to turn up their music after midnight, have all-night noisy and romantic interludes, or have a loud argument at the strangest times. Begging them for quiet and even banging on their walls don't seem to help much. And unfortunately for me, the next morning my frustration and growing anger make it more difficult for me to concentrate on anything in class.

Worst of all, especially for someone who enjoys good food, is the experience of eating in the dining halls. First of all, the lines are usually so long before class that I usually end up not eating any breakfast. And when I do wait in line, the waits are definitely not worth it. It is difficult for me to even order the stale, dry sandwiches, the soggy and wilted salads, and the tasteless and sometime unidentifiable main courses. If I want to have a good meal, I end up having to go off-campus.

Yet despite all the problems with living in the dorms, I still feel that I'm accomplishing something worthwhile going to school. My only hope is that when I'm a junior, I'll be able to find a small off-campus apartment of my own. In the meantime, I guess I just have to put up with the myriad troubles with living in a dorm, and pray that in the upcoming semester, my fellow dormies don't like to party too much.

Exercise 10

Instructions:

1. Review an essay where your teacher has indicated that you have to work on thesis statement and/or topic sentences. Can you fix your thesis and/or topic sentences now?
2. Look back at the principles and exercises in this tutorial and make notes on a separate sheet of paper. You will bring these notes and the essay to your conference.
3. Make an appointment for a conference with an instructor in the Writing Center (18-104) or English 800 Center (18-102). To make this appointment, stop by the Centers or call (650) 574-6436. During this appointment, the professor will make sure you understand the concepts covered in this tutorial, answer any questions that you might have, review your answers to these exercises, and check to see if you can incorporate the skill into your writing.

Reminder:

For this appointment, bring

- any notes about the tutorial that you have taken
- your completed tutorial exercises
- and the essay