

Thesis Statement How To

According to Heffernan and Lincoln in their handbook *Writing*, a **thesis statement**

- is the main point you express, explain, or try to prove in your paper
- makes a specific, precise assertion about your topic
- should be specific, pointed, and provocative, promising the reader(s) some new information about your topic
- should always be more than a vague generalization.

This means that your **thesis statement should make a kind of road map for your readers to follow** as they go through your paper. It should focus on the exact message you want them to take from your paper, and lay out an outline for how your paper will develop.

Since a thesis must be *specific*, this wouldn't be a very good thesis statement:

"The Writing Center is a neat place to go."

This doesn't tell us why the Center is "neat", or even what you think "neat" means—tidy or interesting? A more *specific thesis statement* would be:

"The Writing Center is a helpful place to go because the staff is friendly, the tutors are knowledgeable, and its services can help improve your writing."

This tells your reader that your paper will now have three chunks to follow: one on the friendly staff, one on the knowledgeable tutors, and one on the helpful services. You've mapped out your paper for your readers.

Let's break this process of writing a thesis statement down even further. ***Make sure your thesis statement does what your assignment asks you to do.*** This means that the idea in your thesis statement has to take the form required by the assignment; the thesis statement above wouldn't be a very good thesis for an argument paper, for instance, because it doesn't have a sharp argumentative edge.

If your assignment is to *describe a waterfall*, for instance, you need a thesis that has descriptive language about the waterfall in it:

Weak: "The waterfall at Snoqualmie Pass is very pretty."

Better: "You can see, hear, and feel many stimulating things at Snoqualmie Falls."

This second thesis predicts a paper that has an introduction, chunks on the sights of the Falls, the sounds of the Falls, & the sensory experiences of the Falls, and then a conclusion wrapping it up.

In an argumentative paper, you could write a thesis like this one:

Although opponents of gun control say that it does nothing to fight crime or save lives, a seven-day waiting period before being able to buy a gun is necessary to keep more people from dying, to keep more people from being robbed, and to keep guns out of the hands of known criminals.

This paper would follow the logical plan of an introduction, a chunk representing the opponents' points of view, a chunk showing how the seven-day waiting period could keep deaths and robberies down and keep guns out of criminals' hands, and a final exhortation to implement the waiting period.

So remember: *A thesis statement guides the writer as well as the writing.* It should keep you on track, and every paragraph or larger chunk of the paper should have a clear connection to the thesis statement. It's a good idea to write your thesis statement on a small piece of paper or sticky note as you draft your paper; then you can check each paragraph you write to see how it supports your thesis.

Sometimes as you write a paper, your ideas may change; in this case, make sure you *revise your thesis statement.* For instance, if you were writing the gun control paper above, and decided as you did your research that a longer waiting period was needed, you'd need to change both the thesis statement and the internal references to it so that everything agrees with your revised thesis. *It's okay to revise your thesis if it helps you make your paper clearer to your audience!*

Many resources will have materials to help you practice generating and revising thesis statements. Usually any writing handbook (such as the one required for your composition courses) will have a section with exercises on thesis statements. The Winthrop Writing Center also has a number of examples available in our reference section; we'd be happy to help you find some to examine.