



THE WRITING CENTER
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DEVELOPING A THESIS STATEMENT

What is a thesis statement?

A thesis statement is the idea that incorporates **all the points** that you want to make in your paper **in one sentence**. It is the kernel of the paper. It is the part without which the paper has no reason to exist. The paper should be **reducible** to the thesis: this means that, if your reader has no time to read through the entire paper, he or she should understand what you wish to say from the thesis alone.

How is a thesis related to the rest of the paper?

Every word, every sentence, and every paragraph of your paper must have **direct relevance** to the thesis. If it doesn't, you probably have one of these two problems:

- 1) either you have strayed away from your main idea (that is, you should get rid of the irrelevant point)
- 2) or your main idea is not formulated well enough yet (that is, the thesis has to be reformulated so as to include the point that seems to be left out).

What does a thesis statement do?

A thesis can be formulated in several ways, including some or all of the following:

- 1) Answers a question that begins with "how", "when", "what", and especially "why".
- 2) Gives a solution to a problem.
- 3) Provides your own opinion regarding a problem or an event.

How do I write a thesis statement?

Very few people are capable of writing a good, solid thesis statement before writing the rest of the paper. Most of us go back and forth between the thesis and the body of the paper (this is called recursive writing), or write a thesis after everything else has already been written. Therefore, remember that writing a thesis, just like any writing, is a **process**, not a fully-fledged product that comes out of your mind ready to be put on paper.

How general does a thesis statement have to be?

It is difficult to strike the right balance in a thesis, i.e., to make it not too general and not too specific. The best way to do it well is, again through asking yourself questions that underlie your thesis. Here is an example of how you might do this. Let's say, you want to write a paper based on the following thesis:

It is important to address diversity in public schools.

Too general. Yes, it does answer a question, which can be put thus: "Is it important to address diversity in public schools?" But this question is not specific enough; it does not address issues of reason ("why?"), ways of dealing with the problem ("how?"), or the nature or constituent parts of the problem ("what?"). Try to reformulate the question, for example: "Why is it important to address diversity in public schools?" Now your answer can be more specific too, for instance:

It is important to address diversity in public schools because some students often feel alienated in class, and this may prevent their personal and social growth.

OR: *It is important to address diversity in public schools because it reflects diversity in our society.*

This is much better. In the first case, the rest of your paper will elaborate on the examples of students who feel left out. In the second case, your paper will develop the idea of diverse society and the relationship between society at large and students' social life at school.

And yet, this thesis can still seem a bit vague. Try refining the question, for example:

- 1) Why do some students feel alienated in class? Which specific reasons contribute to this problem? Possible answer:

Due to diversity in public schools, some students may feel alienated due to racial, class, or linguistic differences, which create complex social relationships within a student group.

2) How can a teacher help a student who feels left out to become part of group at school? Possible answer:

The teacher may address diversity in public schools in several ways, including choice of material, specific teaching strategies, and his or her interaction with students outside of class time.

Now this is very good. This kind of thesis gives enough room for the rest of the paper to unfold, but is not so general as to give the reader a sense of uncertainty. In the rest of the paper, each paragraph (or a group of paragraphs) will elaborate on **one** point in the thesis: in the first case, on racial, class (i.e., mainly financial), and language difficulties (that's three paragraphs). In the second case, the subsequent paragraphs will engage teacher's choice of materials, in-class teaching techniques, and student-teacher interaction out of class (that's also three paragraphs). And make sure **all of it is related to diversity**, lest your paper strays away from the main topic.

You could go further and try to refine the question—and thus the answer—still further, for instance: "Why do issues of diversity arise in public schools and what are the ways a teacher can navigate them?" Possible answer:

Issues of diversity in public schools arise due to racial, class, and linguistic differences between students, and teachers should strive to prevent the resulting alienation of individuals within student groups in a variety of different ways, both in and out of class setting.

Excellent. It combines the points you want to make regarding both the causes of diversity-related problems and the teacher's role in addressing them. It gives you plenty of room to work within the body of the paper. And finally, the thesis is specific enough: it shows what the problem is, offers a solution to it, and answers a specific question (or a set of related questions).

Notice that, in the last few examples, you have abandoned your initial opening "it is important to address diversity". And that's fine. In the process of refining your thesis, it may become quite different from what you originally intended. The goal of your initial try at a thesis is to give you a springboard for further work, not to remain untouched up to the last stages of your writing process. Often, what you initially think of as the thesis will become part of your introduction, because it is too general a statement. If the initial attempt of a thesis is, on the contrary, too specific, it may ultimately become one of the supporting ideas. Therefore, your writing

process will often consist of going back and forth **between various hierarchical levels**—the different levels of generality and specificity.

Good luck !!!

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