

Thesis Statements

A good thesis is...

- **debatable.** It can't be just an observation or a statement that everyone would agree is true.
- **not obvious.** By writing a paper, you're doing the reader a favor: you've spent a lot of time thinking about a particular topic or question, and you're sharing the insights that you've gained. To make the time spent reading your paper worthwhile, the reader needs to feel as if she's learned something that she wouldn't otherwise have known.
- **specific.** Be careful about word choice! Every noun, verb, and adjective in the thesis statement must signal precisely what you plan to talk about in the paper.
- **something for which you can provide evidence.** You come up with a thesis after carefully considering a topic. Actually, a thesis is usually the answer to a question that we ask ourselves about a certain topic.

Why do seagulls explode if you feed them antacids?

How do the shades of blue used in Monet's painting contribute to the overall composition?

What is the difference between a snook and a tarpon?

The evidence that you use to support your thesis will be the facts and reasons that prompt you to answer your question in a certain way. A thesis is a conclusion that you draw after thinking about how all the evidence adds up.

American academic writers tend to tell the reader what their thesis is right away, rather than "surprising" the reader by saving the main point until the conclusion. Often we figure out our real thesis only once we've drafted the entire paper, so don't be afraid to move it up to the introduction, tweak the body paragraphs, and write a new conclusion.

A challenge many writers face is moving from a general observation or opinion about a topic to a specific argument and thesis statement. Take a look at the sentences below:

It is important for musicians to know the history of music in America.

NMR is a better technique for identifying the structure of a molecule than IR spectroscopy.

Anne Frank was courageous.

I disagree with the author's argument that people are inherently good.

There are several similarities and differences between these stories.

These statements would not make strong theses. First, they are too broad. To simply say that something is "important" or "better" does not give the reader a clear idea of its significance or superiority—the writer must specify in what ways this is true.

Second, these statements do not inspire debate or disagreement. The last example—"There are several similarities and differences between these stories"—is an observation. It's hard to disagree with a fact that is as easily confirmed as this one. The first four examples are merely opinions, and not ones that seem worth arguing against. So you disagree with the author's argument or think Anne Frank was courageous—so what? Why does that matter? You need to make the reader feel as if there's something at stake in your paper and that she should keep reading because she will learn to consider a topic in a new way.

The solution is to be more specific and to show why your assertion matters. The writer needs to ask... WHY? and HOW?

Key Questions to Move from Observation to Argument

Why? For what reason?
How? How so? In what way?
To what effect? How does this affect [X]?
How do these things relate to each other?
Does this suggest a further conclusion?
What does this mean?
Why does this matter?

So how does asking WHY and HOW help? Let's pretend you start with: *"This poet uses parallelism in her poem."* You have observed this fact about the poem, and you sense that it's significant.

You might begin by asking, "Why does the poet do this?" or "To what effect?"

Probably there is more than one answer—you may be able to think of several plausible reasons why the poet uses parallelism. From the reasons that you come up with, choose the answer that you think is the best. You might decide, *"The poet uses parallelism in the poem to show that sex and death are similar."* An improvement—but you're not done yet.

Next ask, "Why does the poet want to show that sex and death are similar? In what way(s) are sex and death similar in the poem?" Your answer may be something like: *"The poet shows that sex and death are similar because both cause people to experience a loss of self."* Now you're talking.

Something bothers you about this thesis, though. You noticed similarities between sex and death in the poem because of the poet's parallelism, but you also noticed some differences in the way they are presented. For instance, the poem suggests that sex is pleasurable—and death, not so much. If you leave your thesis statement the way it is written above, you won't be able to account for the complicated way that the concepts are presented—as similar and different at the same time—nor will you convey the complexity of your understanding of the poem.

Taking this into consideration, the final draft of your thesis could look something like: *"This poet's use of literary parallelism suggests that although sex and death have obvious differences, the shared experience of loss of self makes them unexpectedly similar."*

By cycling through several rounds of "why" and "how" questions, you were able to transform your observation about the poem into a thesis statement.