

7 The Thesis Statement

A. TOPIC AND CONTROLLING IDEA

The thesis statement is the most important statement in your essay. It is the main idea for the whole essay, and it frequently shows or implies how the essay will be organized. Clear thesis statements are essential for good writing in English.

A thesis statement has two parts: the TOPIC and the CONTROLLING IDEA. The TOPIC is the subject of the essay, what the essay is about. The CONTROLLING IDEA is what you are going to say about the topic. As you can see, this is exactly the same as for topic sentences in paragraphs because the thesis statement in an essay has the same function as the topic sentence has in a paragraph.

As examples of thesis statements, consider those of the three essays in Chapter 6. The topics of the three essays are underlined and the controlling ideas are circled.

1. A personal computer consists of three main components which have different functions.
2. Three of my experiences in this country stand out in my memory as typically American.
3. Three Americans that I have met have taught me different aspects of life in the United States.

It is not enough to just state the topic of the essay although you can often use this as the title of your essay. You must also tell the reader what your essay will say about the subject, which means that you need to have a controlling idea. Here there are many choices. For example, with the topic *personal computer*, you could write thesis statements such as:

1. *A personal computer* is very useful for college students.

(In this essay you would show with examples how a computer can help students in their work.)

2. *Personal computers* can be classified according to the speed of their central processing units.

(In this essay you would show how personal computers fall into different categories according to their types of microchips.)

3. *Brand X of personal computer* gives you more value for your money than *Brand Y*.

(In this essay you would compare the two computers on several points.)

Exercise 1

Underline the topic and circle the controlling idea in the following thesis statements. Can you predict the content of the body paragraphs from the thesis statements?

1. Astronomy is a fascinating science.
2. My two cats are totally different in looks, behavior, and personality.
3. Soccer is gaining popularity in the U.S. because of the simplicity of the equipment, rules and skills involved.
4. A study of American history reveals alternating phases of isolationism and expansionism.
5. The Civil War occurred mainly due to the economic differences between the North and the South.
6. Its beauty, history, and location make Washington, D.C. a fascinating place to visit.
7. Animal behavior can predict earthquakes.
8. Winter is the best season for sports in Canada.
9. A computer is easy to use if you follow these five steps.
10. Black gospel music has greatly influenced several famous rock and roll performers.

B. RULES FOR THESIS STATEMENTS

1. A thesis statement must be a statement, not a question.
2. A thesis statement must be a *complete sentence*. This means that it must have a subject and a verb.
3. A thesis statement cannot be a simple statement of fact. A fact does not need any support, and therefore you cannot write an essay about it.
4. A thesis statement must *state* the controlling idea, not just wonder whether or not something is true. This means that you must state your position on the topic; you cannot simply make an announcement of what you are going to do in the essay.
5. A thesis statement should have *one* controlling idea, not several different ones.

Exercise 2

Which of the sentences below are thesis statements? Put a check mark next to those that qualify. If a sentence is *not a thesis statement*, write the number(s) of the rule(s) it violates on the line in front of it, and fix it so that it is a thesis statement.

- _____ 1. Japanese cars are better than American cars.
- _____ 2. A Mitsubishi is a Japanese car.
- _____ 3. I am going to show you that seat belts are necessary.
- _____ 4. Are seat belts necessary?
- _____ 5. Seat belts save lives and dollars.

- _____ 6. Students who work while they are studying meet a lot of people, and their professors also work hard.
- _____ 7. There are both advantages and disadvantages to working while you are an undergraduate.
- _____ 8. Work study has more advantages than disadvantages.
- _____ 9. Work study: an analysis.
- _____ 10. In this essay I will compare working on campus and working off campus.

Exercise 3

Now it is your turn to write thesis statements. Imagine that you are going to write essays on the five topics below. Think about *what* you would like to say about your topics and *how* you would like to organize your essays. Then write the five thesis statements.

1. Fast food

2. A holiday in your country (specify which one)

3. Television programs

4. The weather where you are living now (specify the place)

5. Popular music
