



## **The Thesis**

A thesis, or the main argument of your essay, is the result of a lengthy thinking process. Formulating a thesis is not the first thing you do when beginning an essay assignment. Before you develop an argument on your selected topic, you have to collect and organize evidence, look for possible relationships between known facts or ideas, and think about the significance of the subject matter. At the start of an essay project, you will probably have a “working thesis” – a basic or main idea that you think you can support with evidence. You will need to revisit this working thesis as you complete the thinking and drafting process, making adjustments to your argument at each stage of your revision. Note: the type of thesis you create and develop depends on the genre of the essay: make sure you know if you are being asked to analyze, explain, interpret, argue for a certain position, etc.

## **Elements of a Strong, Convincing Thesis: PASS**

**Precise and concise:** your thesis should be a one-sentence statement placed at the end of your introductory paragraph. If writing a longer researched essay (more than 10 pages), you may have more than one paragraph in your introduction, but your thesis should still not be buried in the middle of a paragraph. In longer, more complex essays, your thesis may have to stretch across two sentences to ensure grammatical syntax – but try to aim for one sentence.

**Arguable and complex:** makes a claim that others might dispute. A thesis is not neutral or a statement of fact. Your thesis needs to be an articulation of your argument, your interpretation of/perspective on the subject matter or topic of the essay. Vague observations or statements of conventional wisdom are not thesis statements. If you think you have a thesis, push yourself one more step: assume you need to add more depth and complexity to your statement (at least until the final revision).

**Substantial and relevant:** tells the reader what your argument is and why it matters. Your thesis needs to connect your topic – and your perspective on that topic – to a larger conversation: one in which both the writer and the reader are stakeholders. Work to uncover and make explicit the unstated assumptions underlying your thesis. Your thesis (and paper that follows) should enrich our understanding of the topic and answer the dreaded “so what?”

**Supportable:** you must be able to develop and prove your thesis with the evidence you have gathered. Your thesis should not be outlandish, based merely on personal opinion, or an unqualified global pronouncement. An effective and persuasive thesis draws logical conclusions from the sources you use to develop your ideas on your topic. This does not mean your thesis has to be predictable, simplistic, or unsurprising – quite the opposite: the deeper you dig into your evidence, the more likely you are to develop a supportable thesis that also advances a unique perspective or uncovers a new idea.

## **Quick Thesis Check**

**Do I answer the question or respond to the assignment?** Rereading the prompt after constructing a working thesis can help you fix an argument that misses the focus of the task.

**Does my thesis reflect an interpretation or analytical understanding of the material/texts I am using?** If your thesis simply states facts that no one would or could disagree with, you may be summarizing and not making an argument.

**Is my thesis statement specific enough?** If your thesis contains words like “good,” “real,” “accurate,” “successful” (or their opposites), you may be signaling a personal, unsubstantiated opinion or non-specific claim.

**Does my thesis pass the “how and why” test?** If a reader’s first response is “how” or “why,” your thesis may be too open-ended.

**Does my thesis pass the “so what” test?** If a reader’s first response is “so what?” then you need to add depth and complexity, perhaps by connecting your thesis to a larger conversation or explaining the significance of your point.

**Do I stick to my thesis throughout the paper, or do I wander in places?** If your thesis and the body of your essay do not seem to go together, one of them has to change. Remember: you will need to change your working thesis to reflect new ideas or conclusions you have reached while drafting and revising your essay. Always reassess and revise your thesis as necessary.