

Developing a Thesis

A thesis statement is the main idea of your paper in a nutshell. Developing a working thesis should be among your first priorities when you begin the drafting process. "Working" is the operative word here; your thesis may dramatically change, evolve or stay exactly the same through the writing and research process, but it is a good idea to start with some sort of plan in mind. It is convention in ENG 101 to put your thesis statement at the end of your introduction paragraph.

The Important Thing is to Ask Questions

Mulling over a topical checklist can help you circumvent writer's block. It can help you discover a number of possibilities for developing a thesis. Consider whether you want to inform or persuade your readers.

1. Exactly what is my subject? Can my thesis inform or persuade my audience on this point?
2. Do I need or want to emphasize the positive or the negative aspects of my subject?
3. Can my subject be divided up into parts? Is one aspect more important or more relevant to my audience than others? What do I need or want to stress in my thesis? How should I organize these parts to achieve this emphasis?
4. Just what does my subject remind me of? Is my subject, whether a person, a thing, or an event, similar to another person, thing, or event that is probably familiar to my readers? Are there any unexpected and enlightening similarities? Is the comparison favorable or unfavorable? Does the comparison make my subject easier to understand? How can I make these comparisons so that they clarify my point for my reader?
5. If my subject is an event or thing, what caused or created it? Would understanding the cause or a precedent make it easier for my audience to understand my subject? Should I include these in my thesis?
6. What effects has my subject had or is it likely to have? Are the effects important or unexpected? Should my thesis include these?

Developing a Working Thesis

Once you've chosen a topic, you need to decide what you're going to say about it. Remember the working thesis should have two parts: the topic itself and your comment on the topic. You can make the thesis more explicit later, but for now, get the basics down. For example:

The use of public school vouchers by the states / should not only be allowed but recommended and encouraged by the federal government.

Note that the chosen topic is to the left of the slash mark, and what the writer wants to say about it is to the right. This working thesis is enough to get the writer started; he or she can begin researching and reading about the topic, therefore, gaining information and establishing what the above claim should be based upon.

An Explicit Thesis Statement

When the research is underway, the thesis statement can be made more explicit by articulating the lines of argument, analysis or explanation, depending upon the type of paper that's being written. You can complicate the language and make the thesis more interesting later; for now using the following template may help you get started on your writing project.

In this essay, I plan to (argue, defend, explain, demonstrate, analyze) that _____ because of (1) _____, (2) _____, and (3) _____.

When this formula is applied to the sample working thesis stated earlier, it becomes:

In this essay, I plan to argue that the use of public school vouchers should be recommended and encouraged by the federal government because realizing that they don't have a captive audience and being forced to compete for students will force public schools to improve and because students and parents deserve choice where education is concerned.

Refining the Thesis Statement

After working on the paper and building an introduction, the thesis can always be reworded, or refined. For example:

While the use of school vouchers is currently up to the discretion of the states with no interaction or interference from the federal government, the country would be best served if the government would not only recommend but encourage the use of vouchers.

Notice that the lines of argument are not articulated in this version of the thesis statement. That's an acceptable way to approach the assignment especially if you've created an outline or developed an explicit thesis and know where you're going with the rest of the paper. The obvious danger in this method is the temptation to wander, or stray off topic. One way to curb that tendency is to go ahead and fully detail your plan for the paper in the thesis statement, and you may prefer this method even if you don't tend to wander off track!

Consider this version of our sample thesis:

While the use of school vouchers is currently up to the discretion of the states with no interaction or interference from the federal government, the country would be best served if the government would not only recommend but encourage the use of vouchers; if more people used vouchers, public schools would be forced to compete for students, thus forced to improve their schools, and as a result, parents and children would get the choice and educational opportunities they deserve.

If you're like most students, you're probably thinking, "But that's too long!" It *is* a long sentence, but it is also a grammatically correct sentence. And really, a thesis doesn't have to be just one sentence. A period could easily replace the semi-colon after "vouchers" and before "if more people." Sometimes for longer papers, a thesis paragraph may be the most appropriate choice. The bottom line is: keep your options open, develop a working thesis, and then an explicit thesis to guide you, but

allow yourself the freedom to compose the type of thesis that's right for your writing assignment.

NINE ERRORS TO AVOID WHEN COMPOSING A THESIS

A thesis cannot be a fragment; it must express a complete thought.

Poor: how life is in a racial ghetto.

Better: Residents of a racial ghetto tend to have a higher death rate, a higher infant mortality rate, and a higher unemployment rate, than do residents of the suburbs.

A thesis must not be worded as a question. (Sometimes the answer to the question can be the thesis.)

Poor: Do Americans really need large refrigerators?

Better: If Americans did their marketing daily, as do some Europeans, they could save energy because they could use smaller refrigerators.

A thesis must not be too broad.

Poor: The literature of mythology contains many resurrection stories.

Better: One of the oldest resurrection myths is the story of the Egyptian god Osiris.

A thesis should not contain unrelated elements.

Poor: All novelists seek the truth, and some novelists are good psychologists.

Better: In their attempt to probe human nature, many novelists become excellent psychologists.

A thesis should not contain phrases like “I think” or “in my opinion” because they weaken the writer’s argument.

Poor: In my opinion, all cigarette smoking in public places should be banned because of the adverse effects of “passive smoking” on non-smokers.

Better: All cigarette smoking in public places should be banned because of the adverse effects of “passive smoking” on non-smokers.

A thesis should not be expressed in vague language.

Poor: Religion as part of the school curriculum should be avoided because it can cause trouble.

Better: Religion should not be part of the school curriculum because it is a private and highly personal commitment.

A thesis must not be expressed in muddled or incoherent language.

Poor: Homosexuality is a “status” offence to the effect that the participants are willing so that the relationship is voluntary in character rather than the type described in a “victim-perpetrator” model.

Better: Homosexuality between two consenting adults should be considered as alternate life style rather than a crime.

A thesis should not be expressed in figurative language (symbolic in any way).

Poor: The amazons of today are trying to purge all the stag words from the English language.

Better: Today’s feminists are trying to eliminate the use of sexually-biased words from public use.

A thesis should not simply state a fact.

Poor: Women have been repressed at different times and in different cultures.

Better: The repression of women writers in America during the nineteenth century contributed to the idea that there were relatively few writers who should be included in anthologies.