

Tip Sheet – Forming a Thesis Statement

- The *subject* of your paper is what you’re writing about, in the broadest sense.
- The *topic* is a narrow sliver of the subject
- The *thesis* is narrower still – the idea that you’re trying to prove in your paper
- The *thesis statement* is a single sentence that expresses the thesis

You will submit your thesis statement to me to ensure that you are on the right track.

Imagine you’re writing a paper on “human-bear interactions”. The topic is “the relationship between Goldilocks and the three bears”. What is your thesis going to be? Here are a couple of ideas... ‘bears that hang around with people end up eating porridge and sleeping in beds’; ‘both blonds and baby bears prefer medium firm mattresses’; ‘humans and bears share forest resources’

What is your thesis?

A thesis turns your paper from a simple report on information that you’ve collected into an argument supporting a particular interpretation of the facts. Imagine you are an attorney making a case before a jury. Your job (as the writer of your paper) is to...

1. gather all the relevant information about the case
2. analyze and come up with a reasonable interpretation of the facts
3. extract one main idea in a single sentence (this is your thesis statement)
4. organize the evidence to show how it supports your thesis
5. answer in advance any likely objections from the opposing side (be able to critique your own conclusions)
6. convince the ‘jury’ (your peer reviewer and your instructor) that your thesis has merit

TOO BROAD/TOO NARROW/TOO OBVIOUS

Your thesis needs to be specific enough that you can write about it in an 8-10 page paper. If your thesis has multiple parts, you may be casting the net too wide:

Human societies tend to form hierarchies in which each class has more power and prestige than the one below it and in which the upper classes frequently exploit the lower classes, leading to an overthrow of the ruling class.

Another tip that your thesis is too broad is the presence of general terms (like ‘art’ or ‘politics’ in the example below):

Art is often censored because of politics

What kind of art? Visual, theatrical, musical, literary? And what do you mean by politics? In which country? In which era? At which level of government? On an institutional level or a personal level?

A thesis that is too narrow in scope is just as bad as one that is too broad. Depending on how you handle the thesis and what information you’ve been able to gather, almost no thesis is

impossible. BUT you can make it much easier on yourself by trying to avoid these pitfalls. Some clues that your thesis is too narrow include: you are having trouble finding information on your topic; you have a lot of information but it's mostly descriptive and doesn't really help you get to the deeper issues; all the categories in your thesis relate to the smallest possible subgroup (eg. 15 year old Asian males born in Detroit). Here are some narrow theses:

In Ocuiolo society, the chief priest's theft of jewelry outraged the middle-class artisans.

Male English teachers in all-female independent high schools are very successful at raising reading levels of students who began the school term no more than two years below standard reading levels for their grade.

The final common thesis statement problem is being too obvious. A self-evident thesis is just a simple statement of fact – something that doesn't warrant a 10 page paper! Here are some examples:

Gauguin Painted many works in Tahiti.

Shakespeare's comedies always end happily.

Computers allow extremely rapid calculations

Here are some good examples:

The visual art of the Navajo often reflects the traditional religion of the tribe.

The invention of the cotton gin prolonged the existence of slavery.

Marbury v. Madison brought the three branches of government into balance by giving the power of judicial review to the Supreme Court

STEP-BY-STEP

Theses usually come from asking the right questions. Here are some examples:

- *Do children of very strict parents behave better?*
- *Does a child's reaction to strict parenting change as the child grows older?*
- *Does spanking affect children's self esteem?*
- *Does inconsistent discipline have a negative effect on children's behavior?*

None of these questions are theses but they're a good starting point. Once you've generated some questions, read over your notes, or some more articles with your questions in mind. This will help you find the direction you need to write your thesis statement. A thesis statement is usually written as an argument that you can support or disprove:

- *Adolescents who are spanked as children are more likely to become delinquent.*
- *Adults with low self esteem are more likely to have been spanked as children*
- *The education system needs to take a more active stance against corporal punishment*