



The Thesis Statement

Overview

Many people hear the term “thesis statement” and feel like running away. Somehow, the term has become infused with mystery and ambiguity. But it isn’t that complicated. So just take a breath and let’s start at the beginning.

The word “thesis” comes from the Greek verb *Tithonian* meaning, to place or set down. When you write a thesis, you are “setting down” or writing into the record, a proposition to be argued, or proved. The purpose of your essay then, is to construct an argument using good evidence to advance and maintain this proposition.

Your thesis is fundamentally an answer to an interesting question, a question that requires analysis and wrestling with the evidence. So, whether your essay topic is assigned or not, start by reducing your topic to the central question to be explored in your paper. Once you have this question clear in your mind, you will have a focus for your research, a purpose for your reading, namely, to find out how experts in the field answer that question. If it’s an interesting question, then you will find that the experts do not agree and your job is to listen in on that “disagreement” as you do your research and to decide which side of the question you agree with. Now you have your thesis statement which is simply your answer to the original question.

This whole process is often best when it’s messy and non-linear. It requires a lot of thinking and reading and taking notes and more reading and thinking and taking notes. It takes time to become informed enough to arrive at your particular answer to the question.

In summary – the process goes something like this:

1. Get your assignment – look it over, talk to your professor, talk to others and start to find the central question you want to explore
2. Use that question to give focus to your readings. Talk to librarians about your question and they can help get you started on the research.
3. As you read and think and write, start weighing the evidence and decide where you stand.

4. When you think you know how you would answer your research question, write down that answer in two or three sentences.
5. This is your thesis statement.

How We Can Help

As I said, this process is messy and takes time. One of the best things you can do to make this effective is to talk to others and get a response to your questions and ideas. That's precisely what we do in Writing Support. Come early on when you get your essay assignment and we will help you to dig deeper into your topic, and have a discussion with you about the research question(s). When you talk about your ideas out loud in this way and get pushed and prompted by a thoughtful listener, you will begin to see more clearly the direction you want to go, where the dead-ends are, what interesting questions might be lurking that you haven't thought of and whether your ideas are strong and relevant. If you do that all alone in your room you will be less likely to build your ideas into something substantial. We won't tell you what to think or what direction your paper should go but we will push you to articulate to us what your ideas are and why they are interesting. That can be a powerful process.

Here's an oversimplified version of how that conversation can go.

Student: "I'm having trouble with my thesis statement."

Consultant: "No problem. So what's your research question?"

Student: "I'm not sure. I want to explore violence in hockey."

Consultant: "Great. That's a big topic. Is there a particular angle you are interested in?"

Student: "Well, I'm interested in youth hockey and the recent decision to ban all body checking in kid's leagues."

Consultant: "Good. Tell me more."

Student: "Well, there's a lot of debate about that – Whether we should allow body checking or not. I'd be interested to know more about that."

Consultant: "Perfect. That sounds like a research question to me."

TWO WEEKS LATER...

Consultant: "So? How is the research going?"

Student: “Pretty good. I’ve had help from the librarians and I’ve been reading a lot on the topic”

Consultant: “Great. Have you been persuaded one way or the other?”

Student: “Well, I’m not totally decided but the argument in favor of banning all body checking is pretty persuasive”.

Consultant: “Ok. Can you write down in a couple of sentences what that argument is?”

Student: “I’ll try.”

Consultant: “Ok. Once you’ve done that, read it to me and we can talk further. We’ll call it your ‘working thesis’ and this will help you to begin building your essay around that. You may find as you do more thinking and reading that you change your mind and that’s ok.”

And so on...

These conversations will help you to “set down” your thesis statement and find focus for your research. In this handout, I’ve been emphasizing that the research question be “interesting”. This is important because your answer to that question (your thesis statement) must be interesting. It can’t be something so obvious that it’s not worth writing about, or a statement of fact, or trivial, or beyond the scope of your essay.

Resources

Other resources have more concrete advice:

<https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/545/1/>

Indiana University, Writing Centre

http://www.indiana.edu/~wts/pamphlets/thesis_statement.shtml