

## WHAT IS A THESIS STATEMENT?

Do you continue to receive comments from your professors about your inadequate thesis statements? Maybe you are not sure what they are looking for, or what a thesis is, exactly. Perhaps your thesis statements usually look something like this:

“This paper will discuss the biblical mandate of baptism.” (Just a topic.)

“This author seeks to develop a rebuttal to the problem of evil.” (Just a promise.)

“In this essay, I will discuss how Shakespeare develops the theme of love.” (Just a topic.)

The bad news is, your professors are right: none of the above could pass as a thesis statement. At times in one’s academic career, it can feel like a thesis statement is some elusive code or perfect string of words that one manages to jumble together on occasion. The good news is that the concept of the thesis statement is actually quite concrete and definite (not magical hidden knowledge), and once a writer grasps the concept, he or she can become confident at recognizing and writing thesis statements, also called main claims.

You may have read the definition of a thesis before, but here it is again:

What is a thesis? A thesis is a sentence that *asserts* an answer to a research question, a solution to a problem, or a position statement. A paper without a clear thesis is not an argument, but merely a theme or topic, while an “argument” is thesis-driven.

Let’s create an example where a writer is given an assignment to write a paper on the topic of “Health and Fast Food.” The writer then narrows the topic to “McDonalds” and begins researching about McDonalds. The writer begins to write down some research in a rough draft, but without having a question to answer, he has no way to know what information to include or exclude—does he give an entire history of the restaurant? Does he focus on hiring and management? Include facts about food production, calories, and nutrition value? Staff salaries? Workplace violence? Sanitation procedures?

Thus, the first step is the research question:

Effective writers usually start with a research question and write the question in the introductory paragraph, sometimes the very first sentence, along with a statement of significance (even though a thesis statement itself implies a question). At least three benefits follow from starting not just with an answer but with a specific question:

- (1) the question brings clarity, focus, and confidence to the reader and writer,
- (2) the question helps create a truly inductive research-writing process, and
- (3) the question helps the research writer to remain open-minded, willing to consider several different viewpoints before committing to one thesis statement.

The writer decides to write about food nutrition, asking “How healthy is McDonalds’ food?” Now all his research is funneled through this query. At this point, the writer will want to create a hypothesis—a “working” thesis. The writer expects to find evidence that McDonalds has a lot of unhealthy ingredients and processes, so he drafts the thesis, “McDonalds’ food is unhealthy.” However, as he researches, the hypothesis might change; based on what he finds, he may realize that McDonalds has responded to public pressure and trends to serve more nutritious food. This cycle of hypothesis → research → new hypothesis → more research is an awesome research process. It is the process of creating knowledge and of learning through writing.

Whichever reasons the research-writer has to back up the thesis, he may want to list those reasons in the introduction for the target readers. This is an advance organizer:

Good communicators create an advance organizer to outline the reasons supporting their thesis statement, usually placed immediately after the thesis statement and often in the form of a because-clause or, better, using a colon. Example: “Many people think that [write differing viewpoint(s)], but a careful study of the evidence shows that [write the thesis statement] for three reasons: [write the advance organizer]. An advance organizer provides clarity, focus, and a sense of purpose that benefits both reader and writer. Moreover, an advance organizer has the potential to outline an essay’s subsections or to become the topic sentences of body paragraphs, which writers later develop with evidence.

Now the writer has a final draft ready. Here is the thesis: “**This paper seeks to determine McDonalds’ level of healthiness.**” Nope! This is not a thesis. It is a statement of purpose or intention, even a promissory note, but it is not an *answer* to the research question. The writer needs to go back to the research question, **How heathy is McDonalds’ food?** and answer the question in a clear, assertive statement: “**McDonalds’ food is still unhealthy**” or “**McDonalds’ menu is still not nutritious.**” Then, to give the target readers the supporting reasons of how the writer determined this answer, the writer should add an advance organizer:

“**According to the FDA, McDonalds’ new menu is more nutritious than its traditional menu, but it still falls short of recommended standards and is far less nutritious than competitors, including Subway, In-N-Out Burger, Chick-fil-A, and PDQ.**”

or

“**While McDonalds’ new menu has improved its nutrition score, the evidence shows that it is still not very nutritious as compared to FDA standards and four other fast-food restaurants.**”

These look very different from the pseudo-thesis statements at the beginning of this lesson. Noticeably absent are references to “this paper,” “this author,” or “this essay.” This type of language is called metadiscourse and is completely unnecessary:

Experienced writers avoid metadiscourse, or reference to their own thinking and writing in their writing, because most metadiscourse is redundant and considered poor style. Consider pruning all metadiscourse that announces your topic, including these phrases: “The thesis of this paper is,” “In this essay, I will discuss,” “The first thing to say about it is,” “I believe that,” “It has been observed that,” etc. These phrases indicate in effect, “I have a topic and hope to think of something to say about it.” So instead of writing, “The thesis is of this paper is,” a better, more direct style is simply to make an assertive claim that answers the research question.

So there you have it! Now you know what a thesis statement is: a clear, concrete, arguable claim that asserts “an answer to a question, a solution to a problem, or a position on a debatable topic.” Now go forth and transform your papers from mere topics and themes into well-crafted arguments with assertive, specific thesis statements.

## WANT MORE EXAMPLES?

Thesis statements may be simple to understand in theory, but in actual practice there *are* some extremes to avoid when creating an arguable claim in answer to a research question. A student could try to write a paper with the thesis “**McDonalds is a restaurant**,” but this is an obvious, uninteresting fact, or to prove that “**McDonalds is as a favorite haven for vampires**,” but one would be hard-pressed to find evidence to back up this claim. Rather, a writer should develop a thesis that is **concrete** (not too general in its terms), **narrow** (not too broad for the project), **challenging** (not too bland or obvious), and **grounded** (not too speculative) with a view to evidence. Here are some examples contrasting vague claims with concrete claims:

NAY	YEA
The amazing and illustrious preacher Charles Spurgeon ministered to many orphans throughout his lifetime. (just a fact)	By devoting his time to caring for orphans, Charles Spurgeon set an example of living out “true religion” for his congregation.
Music plays a significant role in corporate evangelical worship. (too vague)	During an evangelical church service, music allows worshipers to physically, emotionally, and spiritually connect with God.
The book of Job offers insights into God’s character in connection with suffering. (too vague)	Job demonstrates that God is continuously wise, loving, and trustworthy—even during people’s sufferings.
Church-goers care more about flashy entertainment than they do about sound teaching. (lack of evidence)	When examining budgetary expenses, one finds that the average modern church places more value on technology than education.
Hawthorne creates a setting that reflects the mood of the main character. (fact/vague)	By creating a setting that reflects Mrs. Old’s negative emotions, Hawthorne illustrates the extent of her oppressive influence over the other characters.
In his book, Davis outlines a series of changes in the Baptist denomination. (fact/vague)	In his book, Davis argues that despite their struggle with discipline, Baptists remain committed to freedom throughout their history.