

## Writing Thesis Statements & Hypotheses

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The thesis statement constitutes the main point of your paper. It states what you want your readers to do, believe, or know once they have read your paper. Often, accomplishing this will require persuasion or motivation as well as simple declaration.

### Basic Requirements for a Thesis Statement:

1. States the subject of the paper (does NOT repeat the title).
2. Indicates the purpose of the paper without announcing it with “The purpose of this paper is...” or “In this paper, I will...”
3. Conveys the writer’s opinion on the subject.
4. Makes a general statement that leads to a set of main ideas *and* supporting evidence.
5. Uses very specific language (clearly stated topic, subtopics, characteristics being compared/contrasted, etc.)
6. Gives the major subdivisions or scope of the topic.

### Getting Started:

1. Write a simple statement that serves as an assertion. It may be the answer to an assigned question or topic. This sentence will name the topic and establish your opinion on it (e.g. I don’t think children should be allowed to vote).
2. Then add some details about *why* you hold that opinion; introduce the evidence supporting the truth of your opinion (I don’t think children should be allowed to vote because they are not mature or educated enough to make a responsible political decision).
3. Finally, unless the paper is an informal opinion piece, make sure it is written in neutral or third-person terms (Children should not be allowed to vote because they are not mature or educated enough to make a responsible political decision).

### Forms of Thesis Statements:

An effective thesis is neither a question nor a list, but makes a definable, arguable claim, avoiding vague language. The format for your thesis can often be established directly by the problem statement.

If the essay question asks “how,” then your thesis will probably answer it using the word “by.” If the question is “why,” the answer is “because.” Other types of problem statements include key task words such as “analyze,” “compare/contrast,” “define,” and “explain.”

In each case, the thesis must imply the action being performed. **At this point in the writing process, the thesis is still a “working thesis” which can be altered and refined later, but is still a good enough basis to begin writing your paper.**

Working Thesis Examples:

**Analyze:** “While cultural forces contributed to the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe, the disintegration of economies played the key role in driving its decline.”

*The inclusion of more than one cause of the collapse of communism implies that the situation has been investigated, relative effects weighed, and a single cause chosen as the key factor.*

**Compare/Contrast:** “Achilles and Odysseus were both great warriors, but differed greatly in both personality and their treatment of others.”

*The language of the thesis suggests that a comparison of the traits of the two men was made. The statements made in the thesis imply that the differences outweigh the similarities. A revised thesis should specify the characters’ personality traits and the kind of treatment.*

**Define:** “A hero can be any individual whose character and qualities people admire and attempt to imitate.”

*The thesis avoids using a dictionary definition. The thesis suggests that any person can potentially be a hero, which is a more interesting concept than a mere definition, but also very broad. A revised thesis should specify its scope, for example, the texts or cultures considered in the essay.*

**Explain:** “Oedipus chooses a life of pain and exile in order to expunge the guilt he feels over the deaths of his father and mother.”

*This thesis gives a reason why the character chose to suffer. The reasoning is based directly off events from the plays, and so it can be defended using citations and events. A revised thesis could mention the plays or scope.*

## Refining Your Thesis Statement<sup>1</sup>:

### 1. Modification

- Sets more specific, concrete terms for the scope of the discussion

*Farmers in modern towns must adjust to the community.*

vs.

*Farmers in modern towns must adjust to the growth of and potential land conflict with their communities.*

### 2. Substitution or Subdivision

- Substitutes a specific term for a more general one

*College athletes are often stereotyped by their peers.*

vs.

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<sup>1</sup> Casty and Tighe, 1979

*Hockey players at Andrews University are often falsely stereotyped by their peers as having an easier academic experience.*

### **3. Addition**

- Adds an appropriate term or statement that refines or typifies the subject  
*Going on a co-op can often cause academic problems for a student.*

vs.

*Going on a co-op can often cause scheduling conflicts, confusion with financial aid, and personal problems for the student.*

### **4. Specification**

- States the exact sub-topics of the subject that the thesis will address  
*Technology has led to an increase in global pollution.*

vs.

*Transportation technology has led to an increase in pollution of global air, water, and food resources.*

## **Improving the Focus:**

There is some overlap among the four basic types of refining, but the main goal is to be as specific as possible while keeping the statement as concise as possible. Remember that the more specific a topic your argument tackles, the more specific you can be in order to prove it. A broad, general statement about a controversial issue and all the different aspects associated with that big issue can be an enormous task to address.

Once you have a working thesis, also anticipate the counter-arguments. The strongest arguments not only make their own point but can also address the existence of and then disprove the opposition.

The conventional location for your thesis statement is at the end of your introductory paragraph. Although that placement is not required, many professors expect to find your thesis there.

## **Effective Thesis Paragraphs:**

These thesis paragraphs were deemed acceptable by Clarkson University professors.

- 1.** The use of “Indian humor,” the term used to categorize the ironic subtleties of modern Native American life, is common to many contemporary Native American works of literature. It is a unique method of exposing the injustice of the pain, poverty, and tribulations that most Indians endure. This humor comes both in the form of outright actions which appear humorous, and in less obvious statements or implications made by the characters. **Examples from the short story “The Approximate Size of My Favorite Tumor”**

**demonstrate Native Americans' use humor to deal with the injustices imposed by whites over the past few centuries.**

2. Contrasting with the satisfaction Rousseau depicts in “natural life” is the chaotic and uncomfortable state he depicts in civil life. He believed man in civil life becomes “habituated to the ways of society and a slave, he becomes weak, fearful and servile; his soft, effeminate lifestyle completes the enervation of both his strength and his courage (24).” **Rousseau’s description clearly illustrates his view that life was much simpler and more enjoyable when humans were undisturbed by the artificial influences of society and subject simply to their own nature.**
3. Most people are familiar with stories like “The Tortoise and the Hare,” “David and Goliath,” and “Peter and the Wolf.” Though these stories have different plot lines, they all seem to focus on a similar theme. This theme is that no matter how slow, weak, or disadvantaged you are, if you put your mind to something, you’d be amazed at what you can accomplish. In all three of these stories, a seemingly weak character is forced to go against a much stronger character. And, in all of these stories, the weaker character, through hard work and determination, is able to defeat the opposition. This same concept can also be seen in three other works of literature: *The Last Days of Socrates* by Plato, *Lysistrata* by Aristophanes, and *Antigone* by Sophocles. **In each of these works, the main characters overcome a low social standing and rise up to achieve a heroic end which places them in the highest moral rank of their world.**
4. *Fatal Attraction*, starring Michael Douglas, Glenn Close, and Ann Archer, is an excellent example of how Sigmund Freud’s theories about civilization are prevalent in today’s society. **According to Freud’s theories, this film was a box office hit because it contained elements of sex and aggression, which he says drive human beings.**
5. John Locke is one of the most recognizable and influential philosophers to write about government and the rights of the individual. **Yet, regardless of his stance on freedom and “the natural liberty of man...to be free from any superior power on earth,” (17) when one compares a certain event in his life to the ideologies he lays out in his *Second Treatise of Government*, a contradiction arises in his stance on slavery.** Even though his dislike, perhaps abhorrence, of slavery is prevalent throughout this work, his investment in the company responsible for Britain’s slave trade, the Royal Africa Company, seems to prove otherwise.

Go to the end for ineffective thesis paragraphs.

## Hypotheses in Technical Reports and Lab Write-Ups:

Often the purpose of technical papers is to present and analyze the results of an experiment or research findings. In these cases, the “thesis statement” associated with English papers and essays is no longer applicable. The writer must use a **hypothesis**, which the paper will then either support or negate.

A typical hypothesis makes some claim about a cause, effect, or characteristic observed in a certain experiment or situation. Hypotheses therefore tend to be very limited in scope, and address only one particular aspect of the situation. They arise from a question that is asked based on observation of some sort of phenomenon, and give a possible answer to that question. Some discipline-specific examples are as follows:

### *Biology*

**SITUATION:** A collection of fruit flies (*Drosophila melanogaster*) is observed to have significant variation in wing size according to gender.

**HYPOTHESIS:** “Female wing size differs from male wing size in fruit flies (*Drosophila melanogaster*).”

### *Chemistry*

**SITUATION:** Two beakers contain water. A sugar cube is placed into each. One beaker sits undisturbed on the lab bench, while the other is placed on a hot plate and stirred. After a certain amount of time, the amount of dissolved sugar in each beaker is compared and found to differ.

**HYPOTHESIS:** “The rate of dissolution of sugar is increased by the addition of heat and agitation.”

### *Engineering*

**SITUATION:** Two identical piles for a building are driven into the ground. One, however, requires a much greater force than the other in order to reach the required depth. One pile is driven into sandy soil, while the other is driven through sand and a layer of clay.

**HYPOTHESIS:** “The force required to drive structural piles to depth X varies directly with the resistance provided by the soil type at the site.”

In technical writing, the hypothesis is never *proved* or *disproved* by the experiment results; it is only supported or not supported. If it is not supported by the experiment, the hypothesis is rejected and other factors are considered. In the cases above, the group of fruit flies might simply have been a statistical anomaly in which a large number of female flies with large wings and male flies with small wings happened to be randomly collected. The sugar cubes in the chemistry experiment may have differed in composition, or there could have been something present in the water in one of the beakers that helped or hindered dissolution. The difference in force required for pile-

driving might have been caused by equipment failure, or an unnoticed empty pocket or rock in the soil at the site.

### **Ineffective Thesis Paragraphs**

. Paragraphs 1 and 2 are examples of ineffective thesis paragraphs. Paragraph 3 is an example of a rough draft or working thesis paragraph. Thesis statements (if present) are in bold type.

1. In Ohio's poorest schools, there is an issue of priorities in education. Education is a priority in schools because the poorest children are learning at a disadvantage. The disadvantage is that the schools don't have the right materials for children to learn at their grade level, such as books are out-dated, torn or ripped, paper and other supplies have to be rationed, etc. In Ohio's richest schools, they don't have issues to worry about. They have everything for them to have a better education. They get new books and school supplies when they need them. It's like the more money you have the better an education your child will receive. If you pay high property tax, then that will go to help your child with their education.

*Paragraph 1 is a start – the author makes some statements of fact based on observations of circumstances in the schools, and some statements that are merely opinions . The paragraph lacks a main point that can be proven with further evidence and should be revised.*

2. The book, *The Leader of the Future*, contains many essays with different ideas on leadership and its role in the business world today. The essays all contain very good information and they can easily be compared and contrasted as they all in one way or another pertain to leadership. **This paper will compare and contrast the essays, “The Following Part of Leading,” “Leading from the Grass Roots,” and “Leadership and Organizational Culture.”**

*Paragraph 2 is OK for a rough thesis but is much too broad. It does not specify the different ideas about leadership and its roles, why the information is good, or the parts of the essays to be compared and contrasted. Once the draft is complete the thesis should be revised.*

3. One can interpret *The Odyssey*, Homer's epic poem, as a symbolic journey through life. Odysseus begins his journey in a far-off land (Troy), and struggles desperately to reach home, Ithaca. This mirrors the path a human travels: one is born into a strange land (the world), and works hard to return home, be it heaven, or any other resting place for the soul. Reading the work as such, Odysseus, the protagonist, becomes an “everyman” character: his actions, sufferings, joys, and sorrows symbolize those that every human encounters at some point. Sometimes, one is betrayed by trusted friends; Odysseus' crew betrays him. One may face forms of temptations throughout his journey through life. Perhaps one's friends try to tempt him into doing

something against his wishes, something that would delay his journey home. Odysseus encounters such temptation several times throughout his journey. One of the most tempting is by Calypso, when she offers to make him “immortal and ageless” (74). On the road home, one faces ridicule from any number of sources. Odysseus faces ridicule throughout his journey, including demeaning words from Euryalus, who says, “I should never have taken you for an athlete, good at any of the games men play” (111). **All humans face certain obstacles on their journeys through life; the obstacles faced by Odysseus, the archetypical human, are symbolic of the obstacles that any human faces.**

*Paragraph 3 goes into much detail listing each aspect of the paper’s focus. It also uses repetitive language and sentence structure. The thesis and paragraph could be revised.*