

*Essay and Paragraph Tutorial*

**Tutorial 26:**

**Thesis and Topic Sentences**

**Creating Thesis Statements  
Creating Topic Sentences**

This Tutorial includes two files:

- **Lesson (26a\_Thesis\_and\_Topic\_Sentences\_Lesson)**

In order to learn the material presented in this tutorial more effectively, as you read you should take notes in a place that you can reference later. If it is convenient, you could print the tutorial and annotate it so you can keep it for future reference.

- **Exercises (26b\_Thesis\_and\_Topic\_Sentences\_Exercises** – located in the same area as the lesson)

- It has highlighted areas for you to answer the exercises using an application such as Adobe Acrobat Reader.
- Download and save this file as your own; you will share it with an instructor after you complete the lesson and exercises.

Please contact the Writing Center with any questions or difficulties:

[csmtwc@smccd.edu](mailto:csmtwc@smccd.edu) or 650-574-6436.

## **Thesis Statements**

### **What is a Thesis Statement?**

**The main point or controlling idea of any essay is its thesis.** It is an **arguable assertion—your opinion or position**—on your topic and is, without question, the most important sentence in an academic essay. Having a thesis is useful to both the writer and the reader since **its primary function is to organize, predict, control, and define the entire paper.**

In many cases, a thesis sentence will not only outline the essay's main point, but also predict and control the direction that the paper is going to take. The thesis thus serves as a *contract between the reader and the writer* because it promises both the central purpose of the essay and the structure of the paper as well. It gives the essay a sense of unity and helps keep the writer focused while writing. Generally located **at the end of the introduction**, the thesis is usually only one or two sentences (although in a longer paper the thesis may be stated in several sentences).

### **What is a Thesis Statement good for?**

A good thesis statement

- is more than a statement of fact and makes an arguable assertion about a topic; it states the position a writer has reached about the topic and is usually at the end of the introduction
- is a complete sentence that expresses an opinion or an idea about a topic that can be supported or more fully developed in the body of the essay
- summarizes the whole essay in one sentence and promises or reflects the essay's main purpose or "so what"
- provides the structure or unifying framework for the scope, focus, and direction of the essay
- predicts, controls, and obligates and serves as a contract between the reader and the writer
- limits the topic to be narrow enough to make it manageable so it can be fully supported but not too broad for the scope of an essay

### **How do I develop a Thesis Statement?**

While the **topic is what the paper is about**, the **thesis defines your opinion or position on that particular topic.** For this reason, it is important to develop a **tentative or working thesis statement** early in composing your essay because it will help guide your thoughts and possible research. When you have decided on your essay's topic, you can begin to develop your thesis by examining your topic, perhaps doing some exploratory reading and writing, or reflecting and pulling from class discussions or conversations with classmates and friends.

A writer develops a thesis **by asking questions about the topic** and by focusing on a basic point or question which the topic raises. The answer to such a question will be your thesis: what you think about a specific topic. The topic is your question, and the thesis your answer to that question.

For this reason, as you write your paper, your thesis statement may change. In fact, in its initial stages, a thesis statement usually is rough and works only as a tentative planning tool. Writing promotes thinking. As you write, you will discover precisely what you think about the topic, and your thesis will probably change. As you continue writing, a more specific, complex, and **final thesis** will emerge as you narrow your focus. Remember that **writing is rewriting**, a continual process that takes many revisions. As you write and do more research, you might even notice that you have lost your original thesis as you find evidence that does not support your thesis. This is absolutely normal since as you write you often reach deeper insights about your topic and realize that your thesis statement has to be more complex to match the supporting ideas and evidence that you have provided.

Don't be surprised if in early drafts of an essay, your thesis statement ends up *at the end of a paper* as you attempt to answer your questions about the topic. Such thesis statements can then be **revised, polished, and moved** since most thesis statements appear usually at the **end of the introductory paragraphs**.

## Thesis as a strategy for the writer and reader

**A thesis is both a writer and a reader strategy...**

**For the writer**, the thesis statement is a writer strategy because it

- serves as a planning tool and one-sentence summary of the writer's opinions about a topic
- helps the writer determine the paper's real focus and lets the writer know if an essay is wandering off in too many directions
- becomes an organizational framework for the topic sentences
- provides the writer with something to define, prove, and develop

**For readers**, the thesis statement is a reader strategy because it

- serves as a contract with the writer, engaging and allowing readers to follow through the paper
- keeps readers focused on the argument so they know what to expect in the essay
- allows readers to identify the main ideas and see exactly how each topic sentence connects to the thesis
- offers enough detail for readers to grasp the writer's argument

A thesis, thus, lets your reader know what to expect from your paper and allows your reader to decide how well you've accomplished what you've set out to do. In fact, some thesis statements might even give you an outline for your paper.

For example, it shouldn't be too much trouble to organize an essay with the following thesis statement:

Attending a community college like CSM makes sense since the cost is low and the quality of instruction is high.

Topic	Opinion	Reasons Or Supporting Evidence
Attending a community college like CSM	makes sense	since the cost is low and the quality of instruction is high.

With such a thesis, a writer would first discuss the relative low cost and then describe the excellent education one can obtain at colleges such as ours! This is a common form for a thesis. The writer first **states the topic** and then **the arguable assertion or opinion** about it, then adds the **reasons or supporting evidence**. The reasons are usually introduced by joining words such as the following: for, as, because, since, due to. The supporting evidence answers the "so what?"

**Please open your 26b exercises file and complete Exercise 1.**

## Thesis Development Guidelines

How do I know a troublesome thesis when I see one?

1. A troublesome thesis usually has no "so what" or main purpose. Instead of providing an arguable assertion, it is **merely a statement of fact**. Some writers might confuse factual introductions to an essay with the thesis.

Example: Henri Matisse was considered, with Picasso, one of the two great artists of the twentieth century.

Better: Henri Matisse is superior to Picasso because of Matisse's brilliant ability to shift between realism, abstraction, Fauvism, and classicism.

2. A troublesome thesis can be **too broad or too general**. If the writer is trying to write an essay and not a book, it may be on too large an issue for a writer to develop thoroughly in a short essay.

Example: Homelessness in San Francisco is a serious problem in today's society.

Better: The problems with homelessness in San Francisco could be resolved if the Board of Supervisors would agree on some of the proposed solutions.

Example: Crime is too prevalent in our society.

Better: Our judicial system should give tougher sentences to criminals who are repeat offenders.

3. A troublesome thesis can be **too specific**. If your thesis is too specific then you will have too little to write about. It may be only on one aspect of an issue, one part of a topic, or the first main point. Examine all your main points for a larger, umbrella sentence.

Example: Getting into Disneyland on the Saturday during Labor Day weekend can be difficult.

Better: Getting into Disneyland can be difficult, depending on the time of year.

4. A troublesome thesis expresses **more than one main idea**. If your thesis makes more than one point, your paper may be confusing to your reader. A thesis which clearly expresses one controlling idea will focus your paper.

Example: The proposed transit system is worth examining, but it has several weaknesses, so it should be run only on an experimental basis for a limited period of a couple of years.

Better: The proposed transit system should be run on an experimental basis for a limited period of a couple of years.

5. A troublesome thesis is a **fragment**; a good thesis statement is expressed in a complete sentence.

Example: How life is in New York after September 11th.

Better: After September 11th, the city of New York tends to have more cases of post-traumatic disorder than other areas of the United States and rightfully so.

6. A troublesome thesis is **in the form of a question** instead of a sentence or arguable assertion. It does not take a position.

Example: Should an eighteen-year-old have the right to drink?

Better: Anyone old enough to fight a war should be old enough to drink.

7. A troublesome thesis contains phrases such as “I think,” “I believe,” or “in my opinion,” which weaken the statement.

Example: GOP candidate Bill Simon and Governor Gray Davis may appear to be different, but in my opinion they are very similar.

Better: To the unsuspecting voter, GOP candidate Bill Simon and Governor Gray Davis might seem to offer a choice in the gubernatorial race; however, in fact they take very similar stands on certain issues.

8. A troublesome thesis is expressed in **vague language**. Try to avoid vague terms such as “things,” “neat,” “interesting,” “nice,” “good,” and “great.”

Example: Negative things have resulted from religion being taught in our schools.

Better: Religion as part of the school curriculum should be avoided because a person’s religious beliefs are highly personal and require individual commitment.

**Please open your 26b exercises file and complete Exercises 2 and 3.**

### **Show that you’ve mastered this skill**

In your notes, write in your own words what you’ve learned about thesis statements and explain how you will use what you’ve learned in your own essays.

**Please open your 26b exercises file and complete Exercise 4.**

## **Topic Sentences**

### **What is a topic sentence?**

As you know, college students are required in their classes to express their ideas effectively in coherent, unified, and well-developed essays. Each essay is composed of several paragraphs, and each paragraph should express a different point or aspect of the thesis. Usually the first sentence of a paragraph but sometimes the last sentence or in another position in the paragraph, the **topic sentence** identifies for the reader **the main point of a paragraph**. If this sounds similar to the preceding section on the thesis statement, that’s because the thesis is essential to an essay just as the topic sentence is the unifying force in a paragraph. An effective topic sentence must therefore be clearly related to the essay’s thesis statement.

The topic sentence in a paragraph functions much like the thesis does in an essay; it sets up a reader’s expectations about what the controlling idea is. In fact, topic sentences often act like mini thesis statements. Like a thesis statement, a topic sentence makes a claim of some sort, but unlike the thesis which is more general, it attempts to explain only one specific aspect of the thesis. Also, as in the case of the thesis statement, when the topic sentence makes a claim, the sentences in the paragraph which follow must explain, describe, or prove it in some way.

### **What is a topic sentence good for?**

A good topic sentence

- is a complete sentence
- can be located anywhere in the paragraph (although it is often the first sentence)
- accurately summarizes the main point of a paragraph in one sentence and reflects the

- paragraph's main purpose
- serves as a contract between the reader and the writer
- promises that the writer will stick to the idea it expresses throughout the paragraph
- is not too narrow and broad enough to require further explanation or evidence

In a thesis, the writer first **states the topic** (what the paragraph is about) and then **the arguable assertion or opinion** about that topic. Similarly, a good topic sentence usually has two parts, **the topic** and **the key words** that state the writer's assertion or opinion about the topic. Consider the following sentence.

**Topic                      Key Words**

Racquetball is a superior sport for several reasons.

In this sentence, racquetball is the topic because it is what the paragraph is about. "Superior sport" are the key words because they state an opinion about the topic, racquetball. The topic sentence identifies and limits what will be discussed in the paragraph. In such a paragraph, the writer would have to identify through **personal experience, examples, facts, or reasons** why racquetball is superior to other sports.

**Please open your 26b exercises file and complete Exercises 5 through 9.**

### **Final Activity**

**Instructions:**

1. Review a classroom essay that you are working on and be prepared to identify your thesis statement and topic sentence.
2. Make an appointment for a conference with an instructor working in the Writing Center. To make this appointment, sign up using the same method you use to make essay conference appointments. Be sure to include a comment or note that you are meeting about a tutorial.
3. During this appointment, the instructor will make sure you understand the concepts covered in this tutorial, answer any questions that you might have, review your answers to the exercises, and check to see if you can incorporate the skill into your writing.