



Illinois Wesleyan Writing Center Shares:  
**Writing a Strong Thesis Statement**

Strong thesis statements are key because they clarify for a reader what exactly the writer is focusing on in his, her, or their paper. It lets the reader know what stance the author is taking if it's an argumentative essay, what claim the writer is making if it's an analytical paper, or what area the writer is studying if it's a research essay.

Let's look at some **important things** to know about thesis statements:

- They are located at the *end of the introduction* of the paper in American college essays
- They are used as a means of *mapping out* what topic, theme, or idea the paper will explore in more detail.
- They help to keep the paper *organized*, the ideas flowing, and the readers clear.

Let's now consider some **misconceptions** about thesis statements:

- They are often thought of as thesis sentences, but this misconception can lead to confusion. The longer a paper is, the longer the thesis statement might be as well, meaning it can easily jump to two or more sentences.
- Many people write what we call the "three part thesis," showing what three things will be focused on in their paper. While this style is great for papers you write quickly, say as part of an essay exam, at the college level we expect more thought-provoking connections. Let's look at how to do that work next.

It's useful to learn how to craft a thesis statement with tension. Instead of writing the "three part thesis," a thesis statement with tension allows readers to examine a problem, issue, or situation and engage in critical thinking. So, what type of thesis is a thesis with tension and what is one without?

Type	Description	Example
Without Tension	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ Thesis is vague; doesn't address a problem within the text(s).</li><li>▪ People can easily agree with your points</li><li>▪ The few counterarguments are easily dismissed and can fit in a paragraph (or less)</li></ul>	COVID-19 is bad.
With Tension	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ Thesis examines a problem within the text(s).</li><li>▪ There will be counterarguments and disagreements</li><li>▪ The counterarguments must be addressed and evidence must be offered to discredit them.</li></ul>	COVID-19 is bad because it exposes disparities in American healthcare.

So why might a thesis statement with tension be better than one without? If you consider the above two examples, you'll notice how much more specific the second is. You'll also notice it sets up a discussion (including counterarguments) that the paper can expand upon. And, you may even see that it still contains parts of the original thesis, allowing you to explore your ideas more fully.

Finally, let's think about a few different components<sup>1</sup> of thesis statements:

*Argumentative*: It makes a case. That's the biggest difference between a thesis and a topic — a topic is something like “Slavery in Huck Finn.” That's not a case, only a general area. A thesis, on the other hand, makes a specific case, it tries to prove something. One way to tell a thesis from a topic: if it doesn't have an active verb, it's almost certainly still a topic.

EX: The portrayal of slavery in Huck Finn is inaccurate and idealistic.

*Controversial*. That doesn't mean something like “Abortionists should be shot” or “George W. Bush's election was illegitimate” — it means that it has to be possible for an intelligent person to disagree with your thesis. If everyone agrees on first sight, your thesis is too obvious, and not worth writing about. It also has to be something you can reasonably argue about: it's not enough merely to give an unsupported opinion.

EX: George W. Bush's election caused many Americans to question the political polling system.

*Analytical, not evaluative*. A college English paper isn't the place to praise or blame works of literature: theses like “Paradise Lost is an enduring expression of the human spirit” or “The Sound and the Fury isn't successful in its choice of narrative techniques” aren't appropriate. That's the business of book reviewers. No need to give thumbs-up or thumbs-down; evaluate the work on its own terms.

EX: Paradise Lost offers a unique portrayal of original sin through textual imagery.

*About the readings, not the real world*. Never forget that books are books and, if you're in an English class, you're being asked to talk about them. Many books are unreliable guides to the real world outside the texts, and it's dangerous to talk about, say, Renaissance attitudes toward race based only on your reading of Othello. Talk about Othello.

EX: Othello provides one author's perspective on race in the Renaissance.

*Specific*. It's not enough to deal in vague generalities. Some students want to write their paper on man and God, or on the black experience in the twentieth century. Both are far too nebulous to produce a good paper. Get your hands dirty with the text.

EX: COVID-19 is bad because it exposes disparities in American healthcare.

*Well supported*. That's the key to the rest of the paper after those first few paragraphs. A good thesis also answers the “so what?” question, therefore explaining to the reader why the topic is important to address and why the reader should care about the argument the writer is making.

EX: Reading What the Eyes Don't See offers a first-person perspective on the Flint, MI, water crisis.

*Additional Resources*:

Purdue OWL: <https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/544/03/>

Rutgers, J. Lynch: <http://andromeda.rutgers.edu/~jlynch/EngPaper/thesis.html>

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<sup>1</sup> Please note that not all of these components will in every thesis statement you write. A *lot* of the style of thesis statements depends on the genre of essay you must write. For example, an argumentative essay is likely to have an argumentative, specific, and controversial statement but might not have components of an analytical or about the readings statement.