

Building a Thesis Statement

A thesis is a statement (usually 1-3 sentences long) that gathers your main claims into a concise format in order to provide readers with a preview of the overarching argument. The chart below is adapted from Diane Hacker's Guide to Writing in Literature courses.

	ONE-STORY THESIS	TWO-STORY THESIS	THREE-STORY THESIS
Writer	Passive Gathers facts and strings them together without analysis or interpretation.	Active Analyzes by using the component facts and their varying relationships to establish connections.	Active + Creative Seeks out contradictory aspects of their evidence and uses that tension to create a nuanced, argumentative statement.
Question	What? Tells what the text/ issue is about.	How? + What? Examines the workings of a text/issue.	Why? + How? +What? Uses the "how" and "what" to examine the text/issue in greater depth.
Key Words	Is/Are Doesn't reflect tension or a specific relationship between the elements of a text/issue.	By/And Establishes means or relationship, but does not explore tension or contradiction.	Although/Even if/Despite Creates tension by juxtaposing different parts of the text/issue. Uses active verbs to qualify specific relationships.
Purpose	Normally, one-story theses have no place in academic writing.	May be used for literature reviews and response/ reaction papers of short length.	Use this kind of thesis for research papers, papers that require an argument, and, in general, papers of an extended length.
Examples	<p>One-Story:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Partisan divisions are a major issue in American politics. Hermione Granger is a stereotypical bookworm. Firing bad teachers is the only way to achieve public school reform. 		
	<p>Two-Story:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Partisan divisions in American politics have been caused by political organization. By contrasting bookish and heroic qualities, Rowling shows that Hermione Granger is not just a bookworm. Public schools should transform their approach to education by firing unsuccessful teachers. 		
	<p>Three-Story:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Despite the fact that the Constitution allows for a variety of opinions to be represented in American politics, the political polarization and resulting partisan divides that this has led to have resulted in a stagnant United States government. Although Hermione initially displays all the characteristics of a stereotypical bookworm, her subsequent displays of courage, adventurousness, and loyal friendship prove that she is a round character. Although unsuccessful teachers are an influential factor in stagnant educational policies, the insufficient amount of trained teachers might pose a greater threat for public schools in America. 		

For more information about thesis statements, see the online version of "Building a Thesis Statement" (under Student Resources).

Using a thesis for global revision

Once a working thesis statement is formulated, it may be used as a tool to revise an argument (if applicable), structure, and/or transitions. Because the thesis statement encompasses main points in the argument, it should usually appear recurrently within the paper to give readers footholds for interpretation. When it doesn't, writers can assume that there are flaws in the argument and global structure, or that the thesis may need to be altered to encompass the argument as it stands.

Argument

- Create an outline of arguments or evidence in the order in which they appear in the paper.
- Isolate (literally, if needed) the thesis statement and compare it with each point in the outline.
- Does the thesis reflect the arguments/evidence in the paper? Do the arguments appear to be in logical order? Do the arguments contain key words and ideas from the thesis itself?
- Edit the arguments and thesis as necessary to ensure correspondence.

Structure and transitions

- Create an outline with the topic sentences and concluding statements of each paragraph in the paper.
- Isolate the thesis statement and compare it with each point in the outline.
- Does the paper contain points not covered by the ideas in the thesis statement? Does the thesis suggest a different order of logic that has not been followed? Do the topic/concluding statements refer back to the main points of the thesis?
- Edit the topic/concluding sentences and thesis as necessary.

Tip: Use “stitching” to ensure that readers are constantly reminded of the main ideas in the thesis statement. Repeat key words (or synonyms) in significant sections of the paper to literally refer back to the thesis statement. Stitching will keep readers on track and ensure that they retain the central points of the paper.¹

¹ Harvey, Gordon. “Elements of the Academic Essay.”

On the difference between thesis and purpose statements²

Thesis and purpose statements have a similar structural purpose: they are both located at the end of the introduction to provide readers with a preview of the contents of the paper. Nevertheless, while thesis statements usually contain an argument or position to be supported throughout the essay, purpose statements simply tell the reader what the paper will be about or what it will try to achieve, its range and focal point.

Purpose statements, like two-story theses, establish connections between the constituent parts of a text or issue and, thus, may be used for literary reviews or response/reaction papers that do not require students to take a position or make an argument.

Examples:

- This paper examines policies that have set the tone for the political relationship between China and America in the past decade.
- The purpose of this essay is to assess the development of Hermione Granger in *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*.
- The aim of this paper is to consider the role of teachers in public school reform, specifically with regards to tenure and stringent union policy.

² Adapted from the Writing Center at University of Wisconsin-Madison's "Thesis and Purpose Statements."

Writing Center Resources on the Thesis Statement

Kennedy, X.J., et al. "Strategies for Stating a Thesis and Planning." *The Bedford Guide for College Writers*. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2008. 310-333.

Nesbitt-Johnston Writing Center, "Introductions and Thesis Statements."
<http://www.hamilton.edu/documents//writing-center/Intros.PDF>

Diana Hacker, "Characteristics of an Effective Thesis."
http://bcs.bedfordstmartins.com/Pocket5e/Latest/lmcontent/ch05/Pocket5ePDF/Characteristics_of_thesis.pdf

Gordon Harvey, "Elements of the Academic Essay."
<http://qcpages.qc.cuny.edu/Writing/Gordon%20Harvey.doc>

Joshua Corey, "The Three-Story Thesis."

The Writing Center at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, "Thesis and Purpose Statements"
http://writing.wisc.edu/Handbook/Thesis_or_Purpose.html