

What Is a Thesis Statement?

A thesis statement declares the main idea that an essay aims to establish. It can be formulated as a single sentence, though at times more than one sentence may be needed. Often a thesis will need to evolve in how it is worded, or formulated, as a writing project develops. A well-formulated thesis provides the foundation for smaller arguments and claims in an essay, and in that way it guides readers through the essay. A strong thesis will focus on a specific area within a more general topic.

Topic vs. Thesis

Your topic comes first and your thesis comes later. A common error is to think they're the same thing.

Topic: Gender depiction in late night comedy

Thesis: In an *SNL* skit called "The Effeminate Heterosexual," Dana Carvey's character violates contested assumptions about the way men should perform their masculinity.

Topic: Religion in the US Constitution

Thesis: Even though the phrase "separation of church and state" does not appear in the original text of the US Constitution, the document nevertheless establishes a strong distinction between religious and state institutions.

| Topic | Thesis |
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| is a general subject area | makes a specific assertion within a subject |
| is what a debate is about | takes one side of a debate |
| is recognized by readers as a general issue | states the position an essay aims to establish |
| is formulated as a word, phrase, or fragment | usually formulated in a complete sentence |
| usually evident to readers right away | presented after discussing broader context |

Attributes of a Strong Thesis

To evaluate whether or not a thesis is ready for essay development, see if it bears these four characteristics:

1. **Contestability.** A strong thesis is contestable, which means a reasonable person could raise an objection and disagree with the claim.
2. **Scope.** A strong thesis does not make claims too broad to be addressed within the space of the assignment.
3. **Focus.** A strong thesis addresses one main idea and sticks with that one idea throughout the essay.
4. **Defensibility.** A strong thesis can be defended or supported without violating basic ethical principles of liberal tolerance and respect for the inherent value of other people.