

Now that you've had some exposure to thesis statements and have worked with them a bit, I'd like to return to this topic and offer some refinement. Not only will this section help you to polish up your thesis statements, it will also help you organize your thoughts. These are our last two topics before we begin writing elegant essays.

Thesis Polishing

Universals, Superlatives, and Hyperbole

While creating thesis statements, be aware of some traps that some of my students have tripped over. You should avoid all three.

- The first is using a *universal* in the thesis statement, such as the words *all*, *every*, or *none*. Although in rare cases a universal might be appropriate in an assertion (such as according to Romans 3:23, "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God"), at other times it might perpetrate a stereotype (All blondes have more fun.) or be considered insulting or even racist. Carefully consider the use of a universal in your thesis statement.
- The second issue is including a *superlative* such as *best* or *worst*. These words are hard to define and are subject to an individual's opinion. Especially in a persuasive essay, thesis statements containing superlatives will be difficult to support.
- Finally, avoid *hyperbole* or exaggeration. Don't make a sweeping statement such as, "Unless voters elect Mr. Perfect Politician president, the country is doomed." Although hyperbole might be useful to emphasize a point, in a thesis statement it generally serves as a distraction rather than an argument.

All of these distract readers and weaken thesis statements. Make sure yours don't suffer from them.

Clausal Thesis Statements

Generally, the thesis statement should not express two opposite or contradictory ideas. For example, the same essay should not make an argument both for and against capital punishment. On the other hand, some essay formats require you to examine two sides of a question and reach a conclusion. The thesis statement for this type of an essay calls for a clausal word such as *when*, *while*, *where*, *as*, *since*, *if*, or *although*. (www.asia)

- Although some consider it cruel, capital punishment discourages crime and establishes safe communities.

Clausal thesis statements also work well with cause and effect essays. When you are asked to identify both a problem and the issues that led to the problem, a clausal

thesis statement is a good way to provide organization.

- If the founding fathers had tackled the thorny issue of slavery at the time they wrote the Constitution, the country might have avoided a bloody and divisive civil war.

History essays usually call for clausal thesis statements because most issues may be considered from alternative viewpoints. Including a clausal thesis gives the assurance that you have considered the question from an unbiased position.

Parallelism and Order

If a thesis statement contains more than one phrase, such as the three-pronged academic or working thesis discussed in a previous section, the phrases must employ a literary technique called *parallelism*. You may be familiar with this term from your geometry studies where it describes lines going in the same direction. In grammar, it describes phrases that have similar construction, that move in the same direction.

- If the first phrase begins with a past tense verb and contains a prepositional phrase, all phrases must be constructed in the same way: Golf originated *in Scotland*, moved *to England*, and hit *its swing in America*.
- The phrases do not have to be constructed exactly the same to be considered parallel. For example: Daytime curfews infringe on the freedom of minors, waste taxpayers' money, and prove ineffective. Although the first phrase contains a prepositional phrase (of minors), the second contains a direct object (taxpayer's money), and the third contains a predicate adjective (ineffective). However, all three phrases are parallel because they begin with a present tense verb.

Any construction is acceptable as long as all the phrases are parallel.

Since thesis statements provide a framework for readers, it is important that topics in your thesis statement appear in the same order as you discuss them in your essay. In the golf example, your essay would begin with a discussion of golf's beginnings in Scotland, then move on to how it developed in England, and finish with the contribution of America. Because your thesis places "hooks" in your readers' brains and establishes a place where they can hang your ideas, it's important that the hooks be set in the proper order.

Style

Since the thesis statement is so short, just one sentence, it should be powerful and memorable and have a little zip. It should have *style*. Three ways to give your thesis statement style are to use active verbs, strong word choices, and careful alliteration.

When beginning writers craft their first thesis statements, invariably they include a state of being verb, sometimes called a linking verb. You should memorize these words, and then banish them from your thesis vocabulary. State of being verbs include: *is, am, are, was, were, be, being, and been*. Which thesis statement sounds more powerful to you?

- Eating fast food is unhealthy.
- Fast food clogs blood vessels and causes disease.



In addition to banishing state-of-being verbs, look for ways to bring your word choices alive. Use your thesaurus or *Synonym Finder* to look for the freshest words. Since your thesis statement is the cornerstone of your essay, you can afford to put more effort into it than you might into the rest of your paper:

- Fast food clogs arteries and destroys lives.

Finally, alliteration, the repetition of initial consonant sounds in words, might add interest and punch to a thesis statement, although it can be overdone:

- Fast food fills physiques with fat.

You will need to use alliteration carefully. English teachers will probably love it, history teachers might, and science teachers will probably think it sounds funny.

Answering Prompts



Often teachers will ask students to answer a specific question or write about a defined topic. The question or topic is the *prompt*. A common technique is either to ask a question or to make a statement and then ask for a persuasive essay that agrees, disagrees, or qualifies the statement. To illustrate this process, let's consider the following prompt:

- Is the Internet a hero or a villain?

You might be tempted just to answer the question: The Internet is a hero. However, not only does this thesis contain a state-of-being verb, it exhibits other weaknesses.

The Questions

To test whether or not you have written a good thesis statement, ask yourself these questions:

1. **Does the thesis answer the prompt?** "The Internet is a hero" technically addresses the prompt, but only superficially. It should be expanded. As you work on the wording, another problem might arise: You might find that you have wandered away from the prompt. When you get an acceptable working or draft thesis statement, re-read the prompt to be sure you have addressed it.
2. **Does it take a specific position?** In a persuasive essay, you must make a claim or an argument. Your thesis should create a dividing line with views on both sides. A thesis such as "Most American households have Internet access today" is not a claim. It is a fact. No one is going to argue against this statement because it is a true piece of information, not an argument. "The Internet is a hero" does take a position, but it is a very weak position.
3. **Does it pass the *how* or *why* test?** If the first question your reader thinks of is

“how?” or “why?” your thesis needs work. Most thesis statements that include a state-of-being verb will be too vague, such as “The Internet is a hero.” How is it a hero? To tighten up your claim, think to yourself, “The Internet is a hero because _____.” It might take a couple of tries before you come to a working thesis. For example, if you say, “The Internet is a hero because of the many things it can do,” you still need to ask yourself more questions: “What things?”

4. **Does it provide enough focus?** You can only spend so much time on your composition assignment. You have other things to do with your life. Therefore, your thesis statement needs to be narrow enough to allow you to discuss your topic in the amount of space you have allotted. If you contend that the Internet is a hero, you do not need to list all of its benefits. Instead, narrow the field of benefits—business benefits or communication benefits, for example.

Thesis Statements that Qualify

Above, I mentioned that sometimes teachers will make a statement and then ask you to agree, disagree, or qualify it. What does *qualify* mean? It means to limit the position, to assert that it is true only under certain conditions or in certain situations. For example:

- When used along with careful supervision, the Internet greatly aids education.

Instead of saying that the Internet aids education all of the time in every situation, this thesis statement limits its usefulness to only those areas that include adult supervision. Here's another:

- Turning off the TV promotes healthy lifestyles, but only when replaced with an activity that doesn't occur on the couch.

Qualifying thesis statements demonstrate careful thinking because they anticipate the audience's objections and deal with them immediately. Also, they build trust and make the audience feel that you have thought about all aspects of a topic rather than jumped to a quick or superficial conclusion.

Planning

I have two more tools to help you write elegant essays—some organizational tools. Both are planning charts to help you visualize what you will say and how you will say it. You probably are familiar with the traditional Roman numeral outline and may have used it to organize your thoughts. If it works for you, great!

However, some of my students do better with an alternative such as graphic organizers. My students have benefited from the two charts on the following pages.



Essay Planning Chart

The Essay Planning Chart lets you look at your essay globally. It includes all of the elements we discuss in this course as well as a place to note the key words and concepts you want to include in each paragraph. Use the chart to think through your essay's structure and content. You might also use the Essay Planning Chart to revisit your essay once you've completed your rough draft. Beginning with a new blank chart, outline your essay, and check to make sure you have all necessary elements.

Fill-In-the-Blanks Outline

The second chart helps you think about the order of your essay and how you will incorporate elegant essay writing techniques, such as how to begin, how to conclude, what points to include in the body of your writing, and most importantly, how to back those points up with evidence, or *showing* as I've called it. This form also helps you to keep track of your research.

Your Turn



It's time to practice. In the next two sections I will walk you through two prompts. One asks you to describe a person, which will allow you to practice descriptive writing. The other asks you to consider the above question: Is the Internet a hero or a villain? Both of these assignments will equip you to write elegant essays.

Notes

Use this page to take notes as your teacher directs.

Thesis Issues to Avoid

1. Universals:
2. Superlatives:
3. Hyperbole:

Clausal Theses

(www.asia)

Order and Parallelism

Style

Thesis evaluation questions

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.

Thesis Statements that Qualify

Planning

Modeling Thesis Statements

Directions: Please rate the following thesis statements using this rating system:

★ Amazing! 😊 Excellent √ Good ?? Lacking

1. TV shows are always terrible.
2. There were inconsistencies in the story line because the writers were on strike.
3. Entertainment is a mind-numbing drug that people use to run away from the world.
4. There were many kinds of programs on the Discovery Channel.
5. TV is bad, bold, brazen, and boring.
6. Movies are usually violent because so many murders and car crashes happen in them.
7. TV shows would be better if producers focused on three things: using less violence, showing less flesh, and to make their writers work harder.
8. In our society, everyone blames entertainment for destroying the morals and minds of youth, but in actuality entertainment is merely a scapegoat for others' failures.
9. By touting equality, television builds unity and understanding within communities.
10. Television promotes communication and compassion by exposing society to a variety of common situations.
11. When viewed with discernment, television programs create a smaller and more cohesive world by encouraging people to care and share.