

# Thesis Statements

## DePauw University Writing Center

Someone has said that pornography is hard to define, but that you know it when you see it! Although this may be an absurd analogy, many people would agree that you could say the same thing about a thesis statement: it is hard to define, but when you have a strong thesis statement it is very evident. Because a thesis guides your paper, a strong thesis statement can make the difference between a solid essay and a weaker one. That why one of the first things we focus on at the Writing Center is your thesis statement. Oftentimes, we find that you have one, but that it could be strengthened. The following definitions and examples may help you to evaluate your thesis statement.

### **What is a thesis?**

Simply put, a thesis tells the reader what issues, or topics, you are going to address in your paper. It may often include the context for these ideas and a specific list of points you will make.

Other definitions include:

- A thesis is a sentence, or paragraph, that defines and shapes the rest of your paper. It is what you are going to prove and support throughout the paper.
- A thesis is statement or a few statements that present a position concerning your topic. It reflects the main points of the paper, and should include (whenever appropriate) a “so what” component of that position. It is typically found in the first (or first two) paragraphs of a paper.

### **What a thesis is not:**

Sometimes when you are defining a term or concept, it helps to say what it is not.

- A thesis is not an opinion that has no support in the text.
- A thesis is not a summary of the text. It involves some kind of analysis or critical thinking.
- A thesis is not something that is blatantly obvious; it’s something that is debatable. “Snoopy is Charlie Brown’s dog” is NOT a thesis; it is just a fact.
- In a comparison/contrast paper, it is not a thesis to simply state, “there are similarities and there are differences” and then list them.
- A thesis is NOT a generalized topic. Instead, a thesis narrows a topic into a specific position or point of view.

The following is not a very strong thesis:

*In his novel Bless Me Ultima, Rudolfo Anaya raises many religious issues.*

Note that this statement suggests a general topic, but does not narrow the topic very much. You could be more specific by saying:

*The events in Rudolfo Anaya's novel Bless Me Ultima cause the main character to question God. Who is God? Is God good? What is evil? Who should he believe in?*

Next, consider how the following thesis paragraph helps identify the context, gives some specifics, and suggest the significance of the ideas that the paper will cover:

*In Rudolfo Anaya's novel Bless Me Ultima, the main character, Tony, is torn between his mother's wish for him to become a priest and his father's wish for him to be a vaquero. These different wishes for his identity also reflect his parents' different religious perspectives. Whereas Tony's mother is a traditional Catholic, Tony's father is a Catholic, but also acknowledges folk religious customs and wisdom. Because traditional Catholicism teaches Tony he can only believe in "one God" he is torn between his parents' beliefs. His mind is full of questions about God: Is there more than one God. Is God all-powerful? Is God just? Why can't the priests heal someone and a folk healer can? Tony comes to some resolution on these issues through the help of the character Ultima who is a curandera, or "healer." Through Ultima's teachings we see Anaya's challenge to traditional teachings of the Christian Church, and we see Anaya suggesting the need for a more holistic or inclusive view of religion. Although this may seem like a simplistic story of a boy growing up, this novel raises some fairly radical ideas.*

Notice that now this is more than a topic: it includes specific examples of the kinds of religious questions the novel covers. It also includes a summary of the conclusions the writer draws: "Anaya suggests the need for a holistic or inclusive view of religion."

### **Some suggestions for coming up with a thesis:**

1. Read the relevant material or assignments carefully and analytically.
2. When you get a paper assignment, be sure you understand the parameters:
  - How long is the paper?
  - Do I need to do research?
  - Do I need to state a personal opinion?
3. Underline or outline main ideas in the readings.
4. Brainstorm ideas. Draw clusters. How are the ideas you want to write about related? Can you group them into categories?
5. Ask yourself, *what will I be proving and why is it significant?*
6. Write some draft thesis statements – get feedback on them from your instructor or tutor.
7. Write the paper and then go back and revise your thesis paragraph to fit the ideas that you actually develop in the paper.
8. Keep shaping the thesis to fit the paper and the paper to fit your thesis.