

Formulating a Thesis

Students are often taught that every essay must have an explicit thesis statement, and that it must appear in a specific place, usually the last sentence of the first paragraph. Often this is true, but not always: even in academic writing, essays do not necessarily have an explicit thesis statement in the introduction. However, every essay should have a **clear thesis**. The thesis (or main idea) of your essay is essentially the **claim** you are making, an **argument** that will be supported in your essay with **evidence**. Your thesis may be implied rather than being overtly stated, and it may not necessarily come at the beginning of your essay, but after reading your essay, a careful reader should be able to articulate your main point. Even more important, **you need to know what your own thesis or argument is**.

Contrary to the advice often given by handbooks or by teachers, writers don't generally start with a thesis and then go on to draft and revise an essay to develop that thesis. More likely, they start with an idea or a question about a subject which they **shape into an argument in the process of writing**. The articulation of a thesis is the **product** of invention, not the precursor, and often the main point won't be clear to the writer until at least one draft has been completed. A thesis comes from grappling with issues and ideas; it doesn't simply materialize out of thin air.

As you become more familiar with a subject, you will start to formulate and clarify your thoughts, which evolve into the **position** or **point of view** you want to express in your essay. In most cases, by the time you begin writing an essay for a class, you are already well into the invention stage of the writing process: you have read about a topic and discussed it; examined and evaluated different opinions or points of view; and possibly written journal entries or summaries related to your topic. At this point, you have a lot of material to use as you begin considering how to shape and present your position or argument. Keep in mind that "argument" in this sense does not necessarily mean taking sides on a narrow "pro or con" type of issue; rather, it means expressing your own reasoned point of view.

The **thesis** or main point that you develop in an essay will reflect your claim or point of view. It must be **arguable** and not simply state the obvious, and it must be supported with **evidence**. The evidence you present may be drawn from other texts, from your own experiences and observations, or from facts. One area of confusion about evidence concerns the differences between facts, opinions, beliefs, and assumptions: We generally think of "facts" as having been proven beyond a doubt, and therefore, unlike opinions, we can only accept them, not agree or disagree with them. However, facts and opinions are both kinds of **claims**, and their only essential difference is in how they are received by an audience. A "fact" is a claim that the audience will accept as being true without demanding proof, although they may ask for an explanation or for evidence. One of the best ways to test the strength of your own evidence is to ask, "**How do I know this is true?**" Think clearly and carefully about what has convinced you that something is true, and then use those reasons and evidence to persuade your audience.

Analytic, persuasive writing consists of more than simply presenting or summarizing other people's arguments; you are also evaluating, analyzing, complicating, and perhaps

supporting or refuting their arguments. As a scholarly writer, your task is to evaluate other people's points of view and to integrate and synthesize them with your own ideas, enabling you to draw thoughtful conclusions about an issue and present them persuasively to an audience.

Look at the following statements and determine whether or not they are good thesis statements:

1. Knowledge is power.
2. The purpose of education is to train people for jobs.
3. Standardized tests are often used to place students in different levels or programs.
4. In the U.S., education is compulsory for all children up to age 16.
5. Education is a fundamental element of achieving the American Dream.
6. Tracking students by ability makes it easier for teachers to do their jobs.