

What is a thesis?

A thesis is the central claim or main argument of an essay. Because it provides a unifying theme for the rest of the essay, it typically appears early on—in shorter papers, most often within the first paragraph or two. The thesis should be analytic or interpretive rather than merely descriptive or factual. Constructing an original and clear thesis statement is essential to writing an effective argumentative essay. (See the Writing Studio's [Argument Essay](#) handout and [Making an Academic Argument](#) tutorial.)

The term *thesis statement* often misleads students into thinking a central claim must be stated in a single sentence. Indeed, articulating a complex claim often requires more syntactical space than that. Several sentences might be necessary to convey your thesis or central claim. While there are no hard and fast rules about how to express a claim, or how long one may be, there *are* strategies you can employ to develop a strong claim and criteria you can use to evaluate the efficacy of your claim.

Central claims: your helpful guide from outlining to drafting to revising

Throughout the process of writing an argumentative essay, your thesis/claim(s) will evolve and become sharper. As you write, you may reconsider your main ideas as well as the evidence for and against them, and your central claim is likely to change along the way. It is therefore helpful to think of the thesis as serving two purposes: (a) as a guide to motivate and structure your first drafts and (b) as the central organizing idea of your final draft. In effect, you will have a *working claim* that guides your outlining and drafting and then a revised and more polished *final claim* that encapsulates your thoughtful and thorough consideration of all the evidence.

Drafting a working claim

Brainstorm about what questions surround your chosen topic. Does the assignment or prompt you are responding to offer inspiration for a claim? What do you think is interesting about your topic? Are there any controversies or debates to which you can contribute?

Once you have generated a list of interesting, analytical questions, consider the possible answers. Can you narrow your inquiry to a central, overriding question and answer? You're ready to draft a working claim! Focus on the relationship between the outcome in which you are interested and what you think causes this result. Think about the justifications or rationale for this argument. If you are having difficulty articulating a thesis, try expressing the pieces of your claim in bullet points. The most important thing is to have a central argument to give your draft a unifying and organizing idea.

Evaluating your claim

As you draft your working claim, evaluate its efficacy. A strong claim will be:

- **Contestable:** Intentionally writing a claim that someone can disagree with may seem counterintuitive, but consider that if no one could possibly disagree with what you're arguing,

there's little point in writing about it. Being able to acknowledge and refute counterarguments will strengthen your claim, not weaken it.

- POOR: "Durham and Chapel Hill have much in common, although they are different in some ways." Well, yeah, but who cares?
- BETTER: "Although Durham's industrial past has created a more deeply troubled economic caste system than found in Chapel Hill, it has also created greater cultural diversity that is now helping to guide the city's economic renewal." There is certainly room for disagreement in this claim; as a result, it provides a much more interesting basis for discussion. The author is likely to support it more passionately than the first claim.
- **Reasonable:** While you want your claim to be contestable, you also want it to be reasonable. A claim can be radical, in the context of current dialogue on your topic, and still be reasonable if you have sufficient evidence to support it. Readers will recognize the difference between thoughtful, critical interpretations of evidence and contortions that twist evidence around to support an unreasonable claim.
- **Specific:** Broad claims are more difficult to support effectively than focused claims. Specific claims also tend to provide readers with more useful information than broad claims.
 - POOR: "North Carolina apple farmers are responding to the current economic situation by finding new ways to generate income."
 - BETTER: "With hurricanes causing significant crop losses over the past decade, North Carolina apple farmers are increasingly relying on agrotourism to generate reliable supplemental income."
- **Significant:** Consider the context of the course for which you are writing your paper. Is your claim adding anything meaningful to the current dialogue surrounding your topic? Note that as you become more familiar with the concerns of a given topic or discipline, you will be able to contribute more significantly to the discussion.
- **Interpretive:** Does your claim offer an interpretation of evidence or does it simply describe a situation?
 - POOR: "The United States is a federal system that divides governmental powers between national and state authorities." Rather than offering an interpretation, this sentence describes an incontestable fact. While it may have truth value, it makes a poor thesis statement.
 - BETTER: "The division of governmental authority inherent to the United States' federal system produces unnecessary competition between state and national jurisdictions. This division hinders the effectiveness of public policies at both levels of government." These two sentences (note that a thesis statement might be two sentences, not just one) offer readers an interpretation. They propose a specific relationship between a cause (i.e. the U.S. federal system) and its effects (i.e. less effective public policies), as well as the rationale behind the interpretation (i.e. competition between state and national authorities).

Revising your claim

After finishing your rough draft, it's time to revise. As you do so, ask whether the evidence you discuss in the body of the essay supports your working claim. Can you make your central claim more specific and

precise? Have you sufficiently addressed (as opposed to ignored) counterarguments that might undermine your thesis? Has your position changed or evolved? In the process of revising, make sure your claim conveys precisely what you wish to argue and that the evidence you present is immediately relevant.

Templates

Occasionally after drafting a paper, you may find you aren't entirely sure what you're claiming. In such situations, it may be helpful to fill in formulaic templates that force you to think directly about your claims.¹

I am studying (*name your topic*) _____ because
 I want to find out who/what/why (*imply your question*) _____
 _____ in order to understand (*state the rationale for the
 question and the project*) _____.

Final thoughts

Remember, a strong claim is direct, concise, clear, and provocative (though not intentionally outlandish or extreme). You should stake a clear and specific position—the thesis is no place to be vague and indecisive!—that strives to generate discussion about a certain aspect of your topic. In other words, your claim should be contestable, open to reasoned argument and debate. Ideally, your thesis should focus on one main idea. If you have lots of good ideas on the subject but are writing a short paper, choose what you think is the strongest or most important argument and make it your thesis.

Additional resources

University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign:

<http://www.cws.illinois.edu/workshop/writers/tips/thesis/>

Indiana University: http://www.indiana.edu/~wts/pamphlets/thesis_statement.shtml

Purdue University: <http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/545/01/>

University of Wisconsin: http://www.wisc.edu/writing/Handbook/thesis_def.html

¹Template based on Wayne Booth, *The Craft of Research*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003) 56.