

AN EFFECTIVE THESIS

An effective thesis is a writer's best friend, especially if the writer is struggling to corral many pages of fact and opinion and shape them into an informative and interesting research paper. We define a thesis most easily when we think of it as the **educated answer** to the question that prompted our research in the first place. Since it is our own interpretation of the research material, the answer is not a fact but rather our informed assertion about the subject. Often, we start to form that answer as we conclude our research and writing. That's the reason why, so often, we tend to state our thesis at the end of a paper. That placement suits the writer's process.

But that placement does **not** suit the reader. The reader hasn't been thinking about your subject and juggling your research for days. The reader may not ever have given the subject even a casual thought. The reader approaches cold the material you've thought about for days and weeks. Think about the implications. Your reader needs to be oriented right away--preferably in your introduction--to your final thought on the subject. Then your reader needs all the help you can supply along the way in the form of signposts and cues. For this purpose, the thesis (or proposition as some call it) is invaluable. It becomes your gift to the needy reader.

An effective thesis performs at least three functions:

1. clearly identifies the subject of the paper;
2. makes an assertion about that subject, one that allows for a range of discussion;
** (sometimes qualifies and expands the assertion);
3. predicts the logical order you will follow in your discussion.

Examples of an effective thesis:

1. Despite never playing sports, young John Doe achieved unusual physical fitness on his Montana cattle ranch.

Subject--John Doe and his physical fitness
 Assertion--fitness was "unusual"
 Order--sports history of the time, your definition of "unusual" fitness, the way in which John Doe achieved fitness

** Qualified and expanded assertion

2. Although public recreational facilities and organized sports boomed in the twenties and thirties, John Doe achieved his unusual physical fitness through work and family recreation on his isolated Montana cattle ranch.

Qualification--public recreation was available
 Expansion--work and private recreation were John's means

FINDING AND FIXING WEAK THESIS STATEMENTS

To fix weak thesis statements, use the list below to identify a flaw (flaws adapted from Rosenwasser and Stephen, *Writing Analytically*). Then employ our suggested revision tips to uncover those stunning thesis statements that have been lurking all along.

THESIS FLAWS	REVISION STRATEGIES
<p>Thesis lacks a claim. (Note the thesis merely poses a topic and an organizational plan for the paper; there is no assertion.)</p> <p>Weak thesis: "This paper will first suggest qualities essential to a good corporate manager and then discuss how those qualities contribute</p>	<p>Force an assertion by completing one of these sentence frames:</p> <p>"In this paper, I assert that...."</p> <p>or</p> <p>"Though some people say ____, and others say ____, I notice that...."</p> <p>Stronger thesis: "Character qualities that make corporate</p>

<p>to overall management style."</p>	<p>managers successful often make their management styles ineffective."</p>
<p>Thesis makes an obvious claim. (Note the first sentence poses an observation that few readers would disagree with and the second states a fact, not a claim.)</p> <p>Weak thesis: "Violence in American schools seems to be on the rise. I will show different views and aspects of this problem."</p>	<p>Pose an inquiry question and answer it. For instance, asking "Why is violence increasing in American schools?" might lead to this hypothesis:</p> <p>Stronger thesis: Though some experts claim that school violence is increasing because of our changing family structures and others hypothesize that TV violence is responsible, I notice that young people have access to more sophisticated weaponry and to more information on using or creating such weaponry.</p>
<p>Thesis makes an overly general claim. (Note the thesis makes so general a claim as to be unarguable. It also invites a rather list-like approach to the continued discussion.)</p> <p>Weak thesis: "The capitalistic economic system has advantages and disadvantages."</p>	<p>Replace generic nouns and weak verbs with specific nouns and active verbs.</p> <p>Stronger thesis: The advantages of American capitalism far outweigh the advantages of Chinese capitalism.</p>
<p>Thesis states unsubstantiated opinion. (Note the thesis elevates the moral judgment of the writer rather than the analysis of the problem.)</p>	<p>Explore other points of view honestly and treat your ideas as testable hypotheses.</p> <p>Stronger thesis: As our society moves away from absolute ideas</p>

Weak thesis: "School violence is on the rise because kids are evil; they just don't know right from wrong anymore."

of right and wrong to more relative ones, young people lack principles for making key ethical decisions, a lack that might contribute to increasing school violence.

Three Potential Problems to Avoid

Because your thesis is the hub of your essay, it has to be as strong and effective as possible. Here are three common pitfalls to avoid.

1. Don't confuse an announcement with a thesis. An announcement thesis often occurs when the topic is stated without a clear point of view or position:

Announcement:

- My essay will discuss having a student pub on campus.
- I am concerned about problems with cable television in Savannah.
- The controversial subject of handgun legislation is my paper's topic.

Thesis Statement

- For the good of the students, Armstrong should not allow a pub on its campus.
- Cable television in Savannah is a failure that borders on consumer fraud.
- Banning handguns in America is a first step toward controlling gun violence in our society.

2. Avoid a factual statement. Without a strong position statement, it will be hard for you to develop your paper with a strong, consistent argument and evidence.

Factual Statement

- Many businesses pollute the environment.

- Movies today are violent.
- America's population is aging.

Thesis Statement

- Increased penalties should be levied against businesses that pollute.
- Movie violence provides a safe and healthy outlet for aggression.
- The aging of America's population will soon cause a crisis in health care services for all Americans.

3. Avoid broad statements. Broad statements contain vague, general or sweeping terms that lack the focus your reader needs to know your essay's point.

Broad Statement

- Nowadays, a high school education is often meaningless.
- Cable news shows cater to the taste of the American public.
- The computer revolution isn't all it's cracked up to be.

Thesis Statement

- High school diplomas have been devalued by grade inflation and social advancement.
- The success of Fox's news shows indicates that Americans want facts served up with entertainment.
- Having a home computer doesn't automatically gain you entrance to the digital revolution.

Thesis Statement Exercises

1. Indicate whether each of these four possible thesis statements are:

- (AN) announcements
- (FS) factual statements
- (BS) broad statements

(OK) effective thesis statements

Topic: The ethics of treating severely disabled infants

- Some babies born with severe disabilities have been allowed to live.
- There are serious issues involved in the treatment of newborns with disabilities.
- The government should pass legislation requiring medical treatment of newborns with disabilities.
- This essay will analyze the controversy surrounding the treatment of severely disabled babies who would die without medical care.

Topic: Privacy and computerized records

- Computers raise some significant questions for us all.
- Computerized records keep track of consumer spending habits, credit records, travel patterns, and other personal information.
- Computerized records have turned our private lives into public property sold to the highest bidders.
- In this paper, the relationship between computerized records and the right to privacy will be thoroughly discussed.

2. Below is a list of key points for an essay. Prepare a possible thesis statement that incorporates all three.

- We do not know how engineering new forms of life might affect the earth's delicate ecological balance.
- Another danger of genetic research is its potential for unleashing new forms of disease.
- Even beneficial attempts to eliminate human genetic defects could lead to the dangerous idea that only perfect individuals are acceptable.