WHAT IS A THESIS?

A good thesis statement makes the difference between a thoughtful research project and a simple "regurgitation of facts." A thesis statement declares what you believe and what you intend to prove. A good thesis will help you focus your search for information. It will drive your writing. Each point you make in your project should support your thesis.

Don't rush! You must do a lot of background reading before you know enough about a subject to identify a key or essential question, even more before you can take a stand. You will likely begin your research with a "working" or preliminary thesis that you will continue to refine until you are certain of where the evidence leads.

The thesis statement is typically located at the end of your opening paragraph.

What are the attributes of a good thesis?

- It proposes an arguable point with which people could reasonably disagree. A strong thesis takes a stand. A strong thesis justifies the discussion you will present.
- It tackles a subject that can be adequately covered in the format of the project assigned. It is not too broad or too narrow.
- It is specific, focused. A strong thesis proves a point without discussing "everything about . . ."
- It avoids general or sweeping statements.
- It clearly asserts your own conclusion based on evidence.
- It should pass the "so what?" or "who cares?" test. This is a scholarly activity. Your thesis should do more than restate the obvious.

How do you move from research to a thesis?

As you read and think about a topic, look for:

- Interesting contrasts or comparisons
- Relationships that are not apparent
- Strong arguments for or against an idea

Consider the following questions:

- Is there something about the topic that surprises you?
- Do you encounter ideas that make you wonder why?
- Does something an "expert" says make you respond, "No way! That can't be right!" or "Yes, absolutely. I agree!"?

Here is an example of developing a thesis

- Select a topic—for instance, television violence and children.
- Ask an interesting question: What are the effects of television violence on children?
- Read through the research, revising as you learn, until you are able to determine a preliminary argument and take a focused stance—for instance, violence in television cartoons increases aggressive behavior in preschool children.
• Remember, this argument is your “preliminary,” or “working,” thesis. As you read you may discover evidence that may change your stance. It is okay to revise your thesis!

**Create a list of questions to guide your research**

For example:

• How many hours of cartoons does the average young child watch per week?
• How do we identify a “violent” cartoon?
• How do we define “aggressive behavior” in children?
• Which types of cartoons are most violent?
• Are there scientific research studies that have observed children before and after watching violent cartoons?
• Which major groups are involved in investigating this question? Which might agree with my thesis? Which would not?

**Now, let’s play: Is It a Thesis?**

Choose the best thesis statement in each of the following four pairs of statements. Consider how you might improve these statements.

*All men are chauvinists*

Our American family structure encourages middle-class men to repress their true feelings, leaving them open to physical, psychological, and relationship difficulties.

*Steroid abuse negatively affects sports*

Steroids, even those legally available, should be banned from college sports because they are addictive, unhealthy, and essentially unfair.

*Hip-hop is the best thing that has happened to music in twenty years*

Though many people dismiss hip-hop as offensive, hip-hop music offers urban youth an important opportunity for artistic expression and allows them to articulate the poetry of the street.

*Many people object to today’s violent horror movies*

Despite their high-tech special effects, today’s graphically violent horror movies do not convey the impact and level of emotion that we saw in the classic horror films of the 1940s and 1950s.

Your turn. Now let’s work together to develop thesis statements around areas in which we already have some background knowledge. Here are a few ideas: high-school sports, school uniforms, high-stakes testing, steroid abuse, divorce, school dances, music censorship.

Does your preliminary thesis pass the following tests? Does it:

• inspire the reader to ask “how?” or “why?”
• avoid statements that no one will react to, or statements that a reasonable reader will react to with a sarcastic “No kidding!” or “Who cares?”
• avoid general or extreme words or phrases?
• lead the reader toward logical subtopics?
• lend itself to being adequately developed in the required length of the project?
FROM TOPIC TO THESIS: WALKING THROUGH THE PROCESS

An effective thesis unifies and structures your project's content and organization. Develop a good one and you're halfway there!

Sample Topic: School Uniforms

STEP 1: Attempt to narrow your topic; if you can’t at this point, that's okay.

Examples: School uniforms in public schools
School uniforms in suburban public schools
School uniforms in our high school

STEP 2: Brainstorm all the possible questions you can think of about your topic.

- Get a partner to help you—let your mind be free to explore anything related to the topic.
- Be careful not to let your bias toward the topic get in the way of brainstorming.

STEP 3: Brainstorm any arguments related to your topic.

Examples: School uniforms: What are the pros and cons?
Under what circumstances?
Who benefits from school uniforms, and how?
Where has it worked? Where hasn't it worked and why?
Is there research to prove their effectiveness?
What are the factors involved at our school?

STEP 4: Take a stance or position.

- Begin with considering the positive or negative. Are you for or against the topic/concept/practice?

Examples: I am for school uniforms at our school.
I am against school uniforms at our school.
I don’t know right now how I feel, but I am leaning toward...
I have no idea.

- What are your reasons for being for or against?
- Using a t-chart, brainstorm all the possible reasons for and against.
- Keep this chart handy as you do your research to add reasons you might not have thought about originally.

Remember to keep an open mind. There is likely to be much you have yet to learn. Decide on a question or a couple of questions to guide your research:

Example: Would mandating school uniforms for all students at our school have beneficial effects academically and socially?
An effective thesis should pass the following five tests. It should:

- frame the statement so it inspires the reader to ask "How?" or "Why?"
- avoid statements that no one will react to, or that a reasonable reader will react to with a sarcastic "No kidding!" or "Who cares?"
- avoid general or extreme words or phrases.
- lead the reader toward your subtopics.
- be adequately developed in the required length of the project.

Do these statements pass the five effectiveness tests?

*Examples:* School uniforms should be mandated clothing.
School uniforms are a bad idea.
School uniforms at Springfield HS will kill creativity and individuality.
Mandating school uniforms for grades 8–12 in Springfield High School will result in increased academic performance.
Even if mandated school uniforms at SHS do not result in higher academic performance, other benefits make it worthwhile.

**Try Developing Your Own Thesis**

Remember, you can always modify your thesis, but what you begin with guides your research.

**Topic**

Brainstorm questions related to topic: