

# Thesis Statements

This handout discusses thesis statements: what they are, how they are used, and how to write/improve thesis statements.

## What is a Thesis Statement?

A thesis statement is usually a sentence (or two) that neatly and concisely summarizes the main argument or point that you're making in an essay. **It is a statement of your position on a subject or topic.** It should also serve as a sort of "roadmap" for your essay, telling the reader where they will go when they read your paper and how they will get there.

## A good Thesis Statement is:

- Specific
- Narrow
- Debatable
- Argumentative

## Every good thesis statement has two parts: the WHAT and the WHY/HOW.

The WHAT part of the thesis statement should state your argument or position and be debatable, e.g. **"Olympic ice dancing is not really a sport."** This is certainly debatable; someone could argue that *it is, in fact, a sport*. This statement also serves as the main idea of the essay. Just from reading this, your reader knows that what is to come in the essay will present arguments showing that ice dancing isn't really a sport. This part also gives the reader a reason to keep reading, to discover the reasons you say that ice dancing isn't really a sport.

The WHY/HOW part of the thesis statement gives your reasoning behind your argument. **This is often the most difficult and important part of developing a thesis statement.** Most of the time, this part of the thesis comes second (though there is no reason it can't come first), usually after a word like "because."

*EXAMPLE: Olympic ice dancing is not really a sport because judges score it, skaters do not compete directly against each other, and there is no ball or puck involved.*

After reading this, your reader has a very good idea of what to expect in your essay. They expect that you will argue against ice dancing being a sport for three very specific reasons. They can also anticipate how your essay will be structured. Chances are, you will begin by looking at the judging system, move to discussing the lack of direct competition, and close with the fact that ice dancing doesn't involve a ball or puck. (This also will help you, as a writer, organize your thoughts within the essay.)

## Four Ways Thesis Statements Go Wrong

1. **Your thesis is too general** – Most of the time, you'll have a limited number of pages to make your argument. Therefore, your argument must be specific and narrow enough to be made in the space that you have. A good thesis statement is specific because it is reflective of a well-developed argument.

BAD: *Baseball is a great game.* (Why? Is it the greatest? Compared to what?)

BETTER: *Baseball is superior to other professional sports because of its unique demands for strategy and execution.*

2. **Your thesis is too broad** – Sometimes we try to do too much with an argument. For example, the thesis statement *Abortion is wrong* will probably need a book-length paper to convincingly argue this well. The narrower you can make your argument, the better.

BAD: *World War II changed the way America thought about war.* (Woah. Good argument. But you'll probably need a PhD and a 1,200-page book to make it.)

BETTER: *The preparations for D-Day changed the way America's military leadership thought about its World War II strategy.*

3. **Your thesis is a fact** – You can't argue a fact, and a good thesis statement is both argumentative and debatable. You can argue *about* facts though.

BAD: *The University of North Carolina won the 2009 NCAA basketball championship.* (Yup. No argument here. And no need to write a paper arguing it, either.)

BETTER: *The 2009 championship team of UNC was the best college basketball team of its decade.*

4. **Your thesis isn't an argument** – A good thesis is always debatable; that is, someone could honestly and in good faith disagree with you for good reasons. An opinion isn't a fact. To paraphrase The Dude, it's just, like, your opinion, man.

BAD: I don't really like Van Halen, or 80s rock in general.

BETTER: Van Halen represents everything that is wrong with rock and roll in the 80s.

EVEN BETTER: Van Halen's baroque guitar solos, fluffy lyrics, and over-the-top hedonism represent the reasons 80s rock is vastly inferior to the Grunge movement that succeeded it in the early 90s.