

DEVELOPING A THESIS

What is a thesis?

A thesis is the main point of your paper. Everything else in your paper should contribute to explaining and proving the main point. Your thesis may be a single sentence, but it can be much longer. In a large paper, you might need a paragraph or more to state your thesis. A thesis is more specific than either a subject area or a topic. Here are some examples of subjects and topics, and a thesis statement that could be written about one of the topics.

Subject Area	Topic
Homelessness	The causes of homelessness
Northwestern's alcohol policy	Student reactions to NU's alcohol policy
The narrator in Jane Austen's novels	The narrator's stance in <i>Emma</i>

Sample Thesis

Contrary to much public opinion, the growth of the homeless population has not been caused by mass deinstitutionalization of mental patients. Instead, the increase in homelessness has resulted from the combination of two circumstances: the decrease in traditional jobs in industry and destruction of low-income housing.

Why is this a good example of a thesis?

It is specific: The thesis focuses on two clearly-stated factors of a narrowly defined topic.

It makes an arguable point. Unless you are writing a factual report, your thesis should make a point that needs to be further proved or explained.

It prepares the reader for more information. The thesis helps the reader define his or her expectations. From this thesis, a reader could expect to learn more about why these two factors cause homelessness, how they combine, and why the deinstitutionalization of mental patients is not the primary cause.



Does every paper need a thesis?

Yes. Every paper needs a controlling idea that helps you select and organize the details. However, not every paper needs the same kind of thesis. Here is an example of a thesis that summarizes factual information rather than arguing a position:

Users may search the university library's catalog by author, title, subject, or keyword. The keyword function is a new addition to the library catalog that allows the user to search for words or combinations of words appearing anywhere in the book's title. Several specific commands enable users to combine keyword search terms.

This thesis prepares the reader for more information about searching the library catalog using the keyword function. Even though this thesis does not argue a position in the same manner as the previous one, it still organizes and controls the flow of information.

Where does the thesis belong in a paper?

In general, the thesis belongs at the beginning of the paper. If the thesis is at the beginning of a paper, it can set reader expectations and organize the information. Good places for a thesis: the first sentence, the end of the first paragraph, or the end of the opening section.

How do I develop a thesis?

You may find it very valuable to consult with your instructor during the process of formulating a thesis.

1. Choose your subject area (the professor may choose it for you).
2. Select a topic (the professor may ask you to write on a specific topic).
3. Narrow your topic by asking yourself the following questions:
 - What questions in class have interested you the most?
 - What points has the professor made that you found intriguing?
 - Have you uncovered any controversies in the readings?
 - What have you found most surprising about the course material?
4. Find a question that you want to answer, or a problem you want to solve. Write down as specific an answer as possible and use that answer as a thesis to organize your details.
5. Assess the thesis you have found:
 - Are these questions and answers relevant to the course material?
 - Am I interested developing and supporting my answer to this question?
 - Will my readers be interested in my answer?
 - Can I find appropriate material to support my answer in the amount of time I have to work on this assignment?
 - Can I ask and answer my question in the number of pages asked for?

From thesis to paper

- Try reading your thesis aloud to a friend.
 - If that person understands what you are talking about and why, your thesis probably makes sense.
- Try writing an outline of points that might follow logically from your thesis.
 - This may help you figure out how to support the claims or promises of information that you make in your thesis.
- Write a rough draft to test your main idea.
 - You may discover that your thesis needs to be changed or replaced.
 - If you write an early draft that doesn't stick to the main point you have chosen, it may mean that you really want to write about something else. In that case, change your thesis.
- Revise your draft to support your thesis.
 - When you are confident your thesis reflects the point you really want to make, review each paragraph of the paper to see how it relates to the thesis.
 - Make an outline of the paper's points and compare it to the thesis. You may decide to add, omit, or rearrange material to make your paper more persuasive and informative

