

Thesis Statements

A thesis statement is the main idea of an essay, expressed in one or two sentences.

- It is an opinion, not a fact. There is more than one possible opinion; it is *discussable*.
- It is about a limited topic, not so vague or broad that it is impossible to write about it all.
- It is not a question, although it may be the answer to a question.

Discussable idea

Discussable means there must be another possible reasonable opinion about the topic. For example, “Dogs are mammals” is not a good thesis statement because there is really nothing to discuss. Similarly, “War is bad” is not a good thesis statement because there is no reasonable opposite opinion. If most reasonable people would agree, think harder.

Topic + controlling idea

A thesis statement does two things: it states your topic—usually a couple words or a short phrase—and it states what you have to say about that topic. What you have to say controls the direction of your writing—what you will include and what you will omit. It is the controlling idea of your essay. Because a thesis controls what can and cannot go into your essay, it can help you select what information to include and can keep you from going off-topic.

Besides controlling what can and can't go into the essay, the thesis statement serves as a road map to your essay. Everything you intend to write about is found in the thesis statement. It's your entire essay in a nutshell.

The working thesis

You need to have a rough thesis in mind before you begin to write a draft. In other words, you must know what you want to say *before* you try to say it.

If you do not have a rough, or working, thesis in mind before you begin to write, you are not drafting an essay at all. You are free writing. Free writing is a good way to generate ideas that you can later use in an essay, but many writers mistake their free writes for their first drafts. The difference between a free write and the first draft is the discipline imposed by a thesis. Without the thesis, your writing is almost guaranteed to wander.

As you write, you might find that your working thesis doesn't accurately reflect what you have come to think about the topic. In this case, revise your thesis to reflect your thinking. If you change your mind, if your research forces you in a different direction, change your thesis. As you write, keep going back to your thesis to ensure that your thesis, your thought, and your essay development match. However, take care not to re-work your thesis too many times; you're probably writing on deadline and can't afford to keep starting over. In the end, you might find that your final thesis is a bit different from your original, working thesis, and that's okay—it's probably because you learned something.

Common problems with thesis statements

There are many ways to weaken a thesis statement. Check your thesis statements for the following common problems.

Incomplete thought

The unfairness of alcohol laws is not a thesis statement because it is not really a statement at all—it is a sentence fragment. It may be the topic. One thesis statement for this topic could be *California alcohol laws are unfair*.

Question

How young is too young to drink alcohol? This is not a thesis statement. A question cannot be a thesis. The answer to the question is the thesis: *Drinking age in California should be lowered to reflect the adult status of 18-year-olds.* That said, a question is a useful hook that can help you get started and lead up to the thesis.

Too broad

Various countries all over the world have different rules about drinking age. This is too broad to write about effectively. (Besides, it is a factual statement that no one can really disagree with.) Narrow down the topic to something more manageable, like *Cognitive development theory suggests that drinking age in California should be raised to 25.* Nevertheless, you might be able to use a broad statement like this one as part of an introduction, which you would then narrow down to your specific thesis.

Too wordy

This essay will prove that a person who is old enough to vote and serve in the armed forces should be allowed to drink alcohol too. This is a thesis statement that is weakened by unnecessary language. Avoid phrases like “this essay will prove” and “I think.” Be direct: *a person who is old enough to vote and serve in the armed forces should be allowed to drink alcohol too.*

Too vague

Alcohol is a big problem for families in this country. This statement does express a discussable opinion, but it is vague. A vague statement is unlikely to keep the interest of a reader, if only because it doesn’t spark images and associations from the reader’s own experience. Consider this stronger version: *The effects on school-aged children of having an alcoholic parent can be devastating.* This thesis statement is more likely to create visual and personal reactions (*school-aged children, alcoholic parents*), and to keep readers reading.

Factual, not discussable

Thirty-six percent of California’s traffic fatalities in 2005 were alcohol related. File this under “interesting statistics I can use as a hook,” but as it stands, it is factual and therefore not discussable. It is possible to argue with statistics or about factual matters, though. Here is a thesis statement that challenges the statistic above: *The use of the term “alcohol related” for traffic fatalities is misleading and results in higher apparent numbers of drunk-driving deaths.*

No reasonable opposite opinion, not discussable

The effects of drunk driving are tragic is a weak thesis statement because no reasonable opposite opinion exists. It is not discussable. The following thesis statement, on the other hand, is unexpected and begs for more discussion (possibly in a personal narrative essay): *Not all the effects of drunk driving are tragic.*

Uses too much figurative language

The runaway train of individualism must be controlled and not allowed to jump the track and obliterate innocent bystanders. This statement uses figurative language. But what is it about—trains? Transportation authorities? Individualism? It is confusing. *An individual’s right to drink alcohol to excess must be balanced with the rights of the community to pursue a peaceful life unthreatened by the excesses of others* is stronger. It is clearer and contains key words (*alcohol, excess, rights, threatened, and balanced*) naming both the topic and the writer’s opinion.

Unclear, unfocused

The inconsistent penalties for drunk driving, even if enhanced, because of the impact of drinking and driving on families who lose their children, fathers, mothers, or other family members to death and/or disability, are not strict enough in the various states, allowing drunk drivers to go free although there is high risk of offending again. This thesis statement is unclear and unfocused. There are too many clauses and lists. This version shortens it and adds a proposed solution to the problem: *We need a consistent, national law that strips drunk drivers of their driving privileges for five years on the very first offense.* Discuss the rest—personal losses, inadequate penalties, and recidivism—in the body paragraphs.

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