



## Writer's Web: First Drafts

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### The Thesis Statement

[\(printable version here\)](#)



A thesis statement is one of the greatest unifying aspects of a paper. It should act as mortar, holding together the various bricks of a paper, summarizing the main point of the paper "in a nutshell," and pointing toward the paper's development. Often a thesis statement will be expressed in a sentence or two; be sure to check with your professor for any particular requirements in your class--some professors prefer a more subtle approach!

Students often learn to write a thesis as a first step in the writing process, and they become loathe to change their claim. Scholars of writing find, however, a fully formed articulation of thesis to be one of the final steps in writing. Professional writers usually weigh their initial claim in light of new evidence and research; student writers should do the same.

### Mapping

The thesis statement can help "map" a paper as it suggests an order or direction for the paper's development. A thesis statement, for example, might read:

*Judy Syfer's essay, "I Want a Wife," exaggerates the marital expectations facing women in our society today.*

The following sentence could continue:

*Those expectations include managing a household, maintaining a career, and having a good relationship with a spouse.*

In this example, the thesis statement suggests an obvious path for development in "marital expectations." The writer develops the paragraph by exploring the term "marital expectations." Three following paragraphs, for example, would logically discuss 1) household responsibilities, 2) careers, and 3) marital relationships.

### The Weak "I will show" thesis

Writers new to college prose often include such statements. Generally, faculty do not like them and they rarely appear in academic prose. This goes beyond avoiding the first person, a rule that is changing even in scientific writing. Nevertheless, a good thesis in a well structured introduction does not need to state "I hope to show why medieval teenagers lacked personal freedom." That point will be apparent to readers soon enough; see the example below for how to improve this type of statement.

### How? Why?

A good thesis statement often answers these questions. You may encounter a thesis statement that reads:

*The lifestyle of a teenager in the Middle Ages was very different from the lifestyle of most modern American teenagers.*

So what? Why should a reader continue? In what ways are the lifestyles of the youngsters different? Better versions of this statement might be:

*Because of the relative freedom enjoyed by young people today, the lifestyle of modern American teenagers is very different from the lifestyle of teens in the Middle Ages. (this at least says why the difference exists)*

*A young person in the Middle Ages had very different expectations about marriage, family, and personal freedom than do young adults today. (this version of the statement*

*emphasizes the Medieval, not modern, teenager, but it still does not present an argument to be defended)*

This revision of the statement above does present a point "worth making," a point one could contest or support with data:

*A young person in the Middle Ages had fewer options for marriage, family, and personal privacy and freedom than do young adults today. (the essay could go on to support what the "options" were and why they were limited)*

An even more detailed version of this thesis could "map" the paper for a reader:

*Young people in the Middle Ages, who were considered young but responsible adults by the age of sixteen, had fewer social choices when compared to modern American teenagers. Unless they followed a religious calling, medieval teenagers had to contend with an arranged marriage and bearing children while living without what we would consider personal privacy or freedom.*

Note how this statement takes more than a single sentence to make its point. Both of the thesis statements above are improvements because they do not simply state the obvious: they give a reason why or how we can accept the thesis statement. If you want a second example about how to get from an assignment to a thesis statement, we have prepared a [detailed example](#) from a paper about Gulf War

### **Using the thesis while writing**

This type of thesis serves another useful purpose: the writer can check the body of the paper against it, since it promises a reader what will follow. If the body contains other information, such as other major reasons for the difference cited, then the thesis may need to be revised to include it.

### **Questions to consider**

- What is the main idea of your paper in 25 or fewer words?
- What is the assignment asking? How can you answer that question AND focus on a small area of investigation?
- What "code words" (such as "relative freedom" or "lifestyles") does the draft of my thesis statement contain? Are these words adequately explained?
- As you read over your paper, have you supported the thesis or digressed? Where? How?

[Click here for a printable thesis statement exercise.](#)

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