

What's A Thesis Statement?

A thesis statement is a direct and conclusive answer to a question.

Note, therefore, that a thesis CANNOT **BE A QUESTION**. Use your preliminary notes and drafts to ask questions. When you write your thesis and your essay, shoot for answers. Remember that “essay” comes from the french, “essayer” — “to try.” An essay is therefore the trying-out of an answer to a question.

It's helpful to formulate clear questions in order to write clear theses.

Most “thesis questions” can fit into one of the following forms:

Is X Y?

Is history (X) irrelevant (Y)?

Is X a good/bad Y?

Are the post-colonial years in Algeria (X) better or worse for people than those under colonialism (Y)?

Is X like Y?

Is the imprisonment and deportation of Muslims today (X) like the internment of Japanese during WWII (Y)?

Should we do X?

Should we start a bloody revolution (X)?

Let's distinguish between your **complete thesis statement** and your **thesis in context**.

•Your **complete thesis statement** is the one that you write at the top of your paper all by itself. It can be long and boring to read and should contain the answer to your question followed by all of the reasons for your answer.

History, the recorded and interpreted record of the past of the human race, is only a partial record in that it omits more than half of humankind and is distorted in that it tells the story from the viewpoint of privileged white males only.

•Your **thesis in context** is the form of your thesis that actually appears in your paper. It might contain all of the above, in one form or another (even over the course of several sentences or a paragraph), and then simply punctuate your point before launching into the body of your essay:

History will continue to be meaningless until it incorporates the stories of all people; women, racial and ethnic minorities, and the economically disadvantaged.

However, there is rarely anything wrong with including your complete thesis, or something quite like it, in your essay.

Where does the thesis in context go?

Having a clear thesis early in the essay helps the reader to follow your thoughts better. Putting the thesis at the end of a paragraph gives it an emphasis that it wouldn't have in the middle or even at the beginning. Putting your thesis at the end of your Introduction makes a strong, clear statement to the reader that you have something to say and that your thoughts are leading somewhere specific. It is typically the job of the introduction to lay the groundwork for your thesis.

It is very common for writers to arrive at their true, full thesis at the very end of the paper, and, having arrived, think they are done. No. When this happens, you should be very happy; but, your next step is to bring that brilliant thesis to the beginning of your paper and work from there. You'll find that being up front with your brilliant ideas actually forces you to be even more brilliant in the rest of your paper. The process of finding a great idea through writing and then changing everything you've written is what ties writing, critical thinking, and invention all together.

Working out your ideas...

If my thesis question is:
Are women better off post-Independence than they were under colonial rule?

My Complete Thesis might be:

Compared to the final 30 years of colonial rule, the position of women in Algerian society since Independence has become more oppressed, which can be seen through education rates and completion, types of professions they occupy, and their general mobility in society.

ask yourself questions

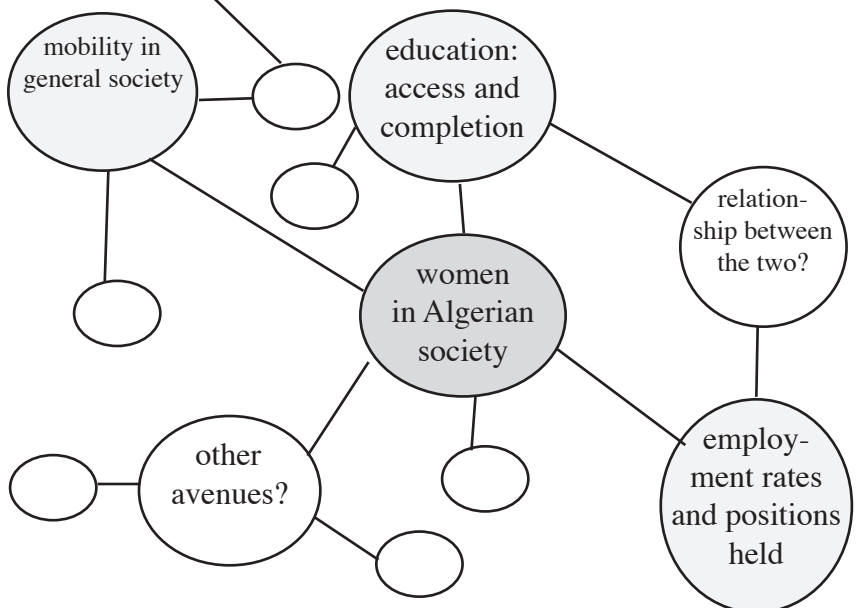
OUTLINE-AS-YOU-GO

How do I define "oppressed"?
What is a meaningful place in society? What are women's employment rates from 1932-1962? What are they now?
Should women's rates be compared to men's? Should <i>pieds noirs</i> be excluded, and deal with native Algerian women only?
What are art's historical roots of education for women--pre-colonial?
To appeal to emotions, you must have a sense of your audience's concerns. Why should your audience care about women's role in society?
What are some dire results of the lack of freedom and advancement for women in society?
How can one define "general mobility" in society? Driver's licenses? Laws about clothing, behavior, etc? Are there laws with corporal punishment v. not?

Outlining is a good way to start your essay, but many writers find it useful to write a draft first, or at least get some words on the page before starting an outline. In any case, don't think of outlines as the painful exercise it was in grade school. Outlines can be organic, linear, visual, what-have-you.

Try making a mind map if listing words doesn't help you.

Once you've written a draft, note in the margins what each paragraph is about. ...Sometimes working with those notes on a separate sheet and literally cutting them up and reorganizing them, adding new thoughts, can give you a fresh approach to your ideas and help you see connections you may not have before.



theINTRODUCTION

l a y i n g t h e g r o u n d w o r k f o r y o u r t h e s i s

The introduction to your seminar essay should be relatively short, but it has a number of jobs to do nonetheless.

the introduction...

- grabs your reader's attention
- leads your reader into the general subject area and issues/problems/ideas related to

thesis

- introduces important or special vocabulary that you'll be using
- leads logically and emotionally to your thesis statement

the introduction should NOT contain your "thesis question." Though this technique is occasionally appropriate, it is usually a false and limited way of leading to your thesis.

That's a lot to do. Even worse, none of it can be done overtly without boring your reader to tears.

Instead, you have to grab their attention with a surprising statement, an appeal to something of great importance, or a juicy detail—think of the first lines of great novels you've read, the mangled fingers of an old Iraqi farmer cupping her daughter's cheeks.

The attention grabber needs to lead naturally into the subject at hand: don't force it. **CONNECT YOUR IDEAS TO WHAT YOUR AUDIENCE ALREADY KNOWS**, what they care about and believe. Sometimes a personal connection, experience, or reflection is a good way to get from the opening to talking about the general subject. In our case, it can even be something in your experience reading the book or doing some other class activity. Alternately, the major topic may be the part where you are generating a sense of urgency. As you lead into the subject at hand, you are essentially summarizing portions of your argument. If I were pursuing my thesis about women in Algerian society, I might want to broach ideas of what makes someone equal so that my thesis, when stated, made a bit of sense.

As you introduce your topic and build towards your thesis, you'll want to use any special terminology in a way that the reader will understand what you mean. Sometimes, you may need to outright define it. When author Allan Johnson in *Privilege, Power and Difference* defines racism such that the racist must have power over another, it becomes impossible for there to be "reverse racism." Please do not quote the dictionary; though the dictionary defines words, it does not tell us what they mean. If a dictionary definition would suffice in explaining a word you are using, then you don't have to explain it in any case.

Finally, and overall, your introduction is leading logically and emotionally to your thesis. ...the attention getter is appropriate to your thesis, the subject area is neither too broad nor too narrow, and the vocabulary seems immediately relevant: these are all logical progressions toward your thesis. The emotion part is a little tricky. The idea of emotional development is that by the time you get to the thesis, the reader is wanting it, ready for it, and will greet it with a mix of recognition, "yes, I see...", and intrigue, "really?... how interesting." In addition, the thesis should be drawing directly on whatever emotional appeals you've made in your attention getter and whatnot. If you've tried to make people sad, your thesis should respond to this sadness.



please consider the following suggestions

Consider your audience. Your audience for the program research paper is your peers and faculty. Having this limited audience means only one thing: your audience has at least read the book you are writing about (and the previous books this quarter). However, you may be the only one who really understands it, at least, understands it the way you do. Don't presume, therefore, that you don't need to summarize ideas from other books, support your claims with direct quotations, or define your terms clearly—you DO. A useful paradox when writing these papers is to write for a hypothetical someone who knows much less than you do AND another hypothetical someone who knows much more than you do. The challenge is to be simply brilliant, brilliantly simple.

Spell things correctly. Use a dictionary —do not trust your spellchecker.

Avoid the word “this” at the beginning of a sentence. It is a vague reference to something in the previous sentence, but the reader can't always tell what. It is never necessary at the beginning of a sentence. Appropriate use of the word “this” at the beginning of a sentence means following “this” with a clarifying or deepening renaming of the thing you are talking about: “... and I realized that my feces was just as good as any painting. This remarkable insight lead....”

Don't write “I think” or “I feel.” Your readers already know that you are a thinking, feeling being and don't need to be reminded. It is important to identify the difference between opinion and fact (and your opinions vs the opinions of others). But don't do it with “I think” or “I feel.”

Generally, put ending punctuation inside quotation marks: “...That's all folks.” If a citation follows, however, consider the citation as part of the sentence: “...That's all folks” (Bugs Bunny, 45). One exception to the rule is when you are writing a question which happen to end with something in quotations: Who said “that's all folks”? The question is yours, not part of what is being quoted.

Write in complete sentences unless making a clear and important stylistic choice to do otherwise. Sometimes what we think is our style or our voice (a popular excuse for awkward sentence structures) can lead to writing that is unclear or difficult to follow. Your writing voice is very different from your speaking voice. There's a reason for this difference. Speaking is a very utilitarian form of communication. 99% of the speaking we do is really about as deep as “Look out!” Most of it fails to convey the intended message and usually gets us into trouble. Writing is a way of clarifying and deepening thought, and the “rules” of grammar and of essay writing are designed to help. More often than not, incomplete sentences and disorganized paragraphs are the product of incomplete thoughts and disorganized ideas. Your job as a writer and thinker is to use writing as a tool to revise your ideas.

Writing is a process of inquiry. Though it is important to produce an essay, you should not lose sight of writing as a process of investigating an idea— not just a mechanical exercising of your b.s. machine. If you are tempted to bullshit your way through a paper or to avoid turning something in because it isn't “perfect,” stop. 1) Wherever you are in the writing process, you should visit your tutor (or any tutor) with whatever genuine material you've got (or turn in something typed). If you've gotten yourself into a tangle of words and ideas, that's the perfect time to have someone else read what you've got and give feedback. In general, give yourself plenty of time to get ideas on paper, leave them alone for a while, then come back. Coming back to your work later is a bit like having someone else read it. In this way, writing literally allows you to think more (having written down thought X, you can concentrate on figuring out thought Y). Ultimately, I'd rather read your genuine mutated messy struggle of an essay than some neat and tidy hollow shell of an essay.

If you don't have a writing process, it's time to get one. A good writing process, like all artistic processes, is infinite. It never really ends, and it never really wants to end. A good writing process might involve: brainstorming, clustering, outlining, drafting, redrafting, revising, revising.... editing, revising... and so on ad infinitum, absurdum, and nauseam. Each of these stages involves a significant amount of thinking and conceptual development that would not happen otherwise.

Don't ask questions that you don't answer. For each question you are tempted to ask, consider the possibility that you are asking because you can't yet answer it yourself. Or try to answer it and see how much further you push your ideas by pursuing answers and not dwelling on questions. Instead, take on the responsibility of a generator of ideas, answers; prepare to be wrong, to contradict others, to find out how little and how much you know. Don't be content to simply know the right questions.

Rhetorical questions, by definition, are questions that need no answer, like “Who would want to stick an angry wasp up his nose?” is a rhetorical question (presuming the speaker is not seeking volunteers). Rhetorical questions are therefore appropriate because they already imply the answer.

Don't write the word “you.” Never write it in your essays. I say this not because it is sinful or wrong but because removing the word “you” will generally lead to better writing. “You” is rarely effective, and tends also to be a habit that keeps writing (and your writing voice) from developing beyond the conversational. To explain: first of all, you don't really know who “you” is. Second, most often, when a writer writes “you,” they mean “me;” nine times out of ten, “me” would be better, more interesting to a reader: “I really hate people who break traffic laws. Sometimes you just want to kill someone.” In this example, the writer is attributing his own outrageous attitude to everyone in order to distract from his irrationality. It is a false appeal to universal experience.

In addition, most readers, in most situations, do not enjoy being led around by an author pretending to know what they would think, do, feel, or say —using “you” is the language of the advertiser, the manipulator, pretending to be your buddy.

Finally, we use “you” most often in conversation. When you are writing, you are conversing with paper; it's bound to be a bit dull. What can occur in writing is not a dialogue between people but a dialogue between ideas, but only if you eliminate “you.”

Use “I” only when you mean it. What most readers are looking for in an essay are ideas, sometimes pretty descriptions. Your reader doesn't really care that they are your ideas or to know anything about you that isn't essential to the ideas. Every time you write the word “I” in an essay, you take the attention off of your ideas and put it directly on you, the writer, thinking your ideas: you step between your reader and your ideas (your ideas are eclipsed). So only use “I” when you really want to be present as a person or a writer in your paper and when your experience, your presence, adds to the reader's understanding of the ideas you are trying to communicate.

Also be wary of “it.” “It” is another pronoun that is often used for little or no reason and can cause confusion. As you proofread your writing, check each occurrence of “it” —could you say the same thing without “it”? Does “it” actually refer to something in your paper, or is it just a habitual way of saying something.

Also be wary of “we” and “people.” For instance: “We should all just jump off a cliff” or “People need to start taking other people's needs into consideration!” Who is being written about? If you're not writing about anyone in particular, you need to reconsider what you're writing or what you know about a situation. If you are thinking about a particular group or type of person, specify who.

Avoid beginning sentences with “there is” or “there are.” Not evil, but usually, more can be said about something than that it exists. There is a cat on my lap. → A cat is draped across my lap.

Look out for strings of short, dull words like “there are some in it that would at times be more likely as well as interested in going to go to the place...” blah blah

Distinguish between “that” and “which.” Use “that” when the phrase it introduces is restrictive, meaning it is necessary to the definition of the noun that immediately precedes it. “Which” is most often used as a non-restrictive pronoun and will therefore introduce a phrase that should be set off by commas.

Examples: Correct use of “that” — “I am going to wear the shirt that you like.” The phrase after “that” is restrictive because the listener wouldn't know which shirt was being spoken about otherwise.

Correct use of “which”: “I am going to wear the blue shirt, which has always been your favorite.” In this case, if we presume that there is only one blue shirt, then the “which” phrase is unnecessary and is therefore set off with commas.

Avoid repetition and redundancy. The two are different. Repetition is a word repeated needlessly that draws the reader's attention away from what's being said. Redundancy is when the writer is trying to say something new but is really just saying the same thing again, or, in a fit of over-explanation, says more than needs to be said by telling the reader the same thing again with different words.

that's enough for now.