

THE THESIS OF AN ESSAY

Every academic essay—whether it is based on research or on your own opinions—is expected to have a *thesis*—a single main point which forms the basis of the entire discussion. In other words, an essay should be written to prove one point. This gives an essay its purpose and creates its unified effect.

The thesis should be stated clearly to the reader. Usually it is expressed in a single carefully worded sentence in the opening paragraph—a *thesis statement*.

THE TYPE OF POINT TO CHOOSE AS A THESIS

A good thesis is an *arguable point*—one that requires the support of evidence or persuasion. It should be a point that you can build a case for, just as a theory or a debating position can be supported by evidence, discussion, and reasoning.

Consider each of the following statements as a possible thesis for a research paper:

Sir John A. Macdonald was Canada's first prime minister.

(Not suitable as a thesis: this is simply a fact. Proving it would not require any line of argument or the development of supporting evidence.)

Macdonald was Canada's greatest prime minister.

(An arguable point, but too broad and too subjective: how could an essay prove that Macdonald was greater in every way than twenty other prime ministers?)

The Macdonald government effectively promoted the settlement of western Canada.

(Much more suitable as the thesis of an essay: facts and figures from research could be used to build a convincing argument in support of this statement.)

THE THESIS AS THE BASIS OF AN ESSAY

Once you have chosen a thesis, you can begin planning your essay. Write your thesis down as a single, clear sentence, and keep it in front of you as you prepare your outline.

Next, find a number of major points that support your thesis. (Each of these points will later be developed into a body paragraph of your essay.)

In the completed essay, the thesis will be stated in the introductory paragraph and supported by each body paragraph; it will also form the basis of your conclusions.

THE THESIS STATEMENT

Because your thesis statement is the basis of the entire essay, it requires careful thought. Give special attention to its phrasing, and give it a prominent place in your opening paragraph.

Make it clear and concise:

Whenever possible, express your thesis in one sentence, giving special attention to word choice and clarity. It should express the *overall idea*: details will come later.

Focus directly on your subject:

Unless you are given other instructions, focus your thesis statement directly on your topic: e.g. *Cigarette advertising is a threat to children's health*—not *This essay will prove that...* or *In this paper I will prove that...*

Place it with care:

The thesis statement normally appears in the introductory paragraph, but unless you are given specific instructions, its exact placement is up to you. It might be effective as the first sentence; it might work best in mid paragraph, or it might be suitable to place it at the end of your opening discussion.

THESIS TIPS

- Even if it is not required, discuss your thesis with your teacher before writing the essay. Advice at this point can be very useful.
- Your thesis remains tentative until you finalize your essay. In other words, as you plan and write the essay, you can always adjust your thesis—narrow it, broaden it, rephrase it—as your understanding of the subject increases.
- Imagine a counterargument: As you are writing your essay, pretend that you are a debater; your opponent is arguing that your thesis is wrong, and it is your task to defeat this opposing argument by building a solid, thoroughly convincing case.
- Keep your thesis clearly in mind when reading the first draft of your essay. Ensure that everything relates to that point, and that the relevance will be clear to your reader. If necessary, adjust the thesis statement or change the content of the essay.
- Restate your thesis in the closing paragraph—not with a word-for-word repetition of the thesis statement, but with some appropriate restatement of the idea. This will remind the reader of your overall point as you draw your conclusions and bring your essay to a close.