

Writing Tip Sheet: Thesis Statements

A thesis is your statement of purpose. It is the claim you wish to make in your paper, the point you wish to convince your reader of. It **must** be reasonably debatable.

A few thesis guidelines:

- **Don't make your thesis too factual.**

Boston's Government Center is built on the site of old Scollay Square.

The above statement is a truth. There is nothing debatable about it. You have left yourself nothing to prove.

- **Don't make your thesis too broad.**

Due to suburban sprawl, the American suburb is actually bad for people.

While this point is debatable, you could write an entire book on this topic (in fact, many people have). Attempt to narrow your subject matter down to something that can be easily handled in a short paper. It's generally better to say more about less, and in the end, a tighter focus will make it easier on both you and the reader.

The isolation and impersonality of contemporary suburbia is having a negative effect on an entire generation, as they grow up disconnected with everything and everyone around them.

- **Don't make your thesis too vague.**

Many modern buildings are ugly.

While this point is debatable as well, the language is far too abstract and unclear. Try to improve on statements like this by providing more concrete ideas:

A cement monstrosity such as Boston City Hall, while well-intentioned, is a destructive force on the architecture landscape, and negatively affects a large section of downtown Boston.

The clarification helps the reader better understand the purpose of your writing.

Focusing a Paper

Focusing a paper can be a trying job, but it is of the utmost importance.

Look at it this way: if your topic is too broad, you end up skimming along the surface of your subject matter, saying a few uninteresting ideas. For instance—how can you really write about Frank Lloyd Wright or sustainable design in a 3–5 page paper? You can't. You can, however, write about an aspect of these topics.

Select a *line of inquiry* and make that the real subject of your paper. If you have selected sustainable design, you are begging to be overwhelmed by information. So narrow it down. Perhaps conservation of energy interests you. That is a start, but it's still very broad. Maybe narrow it down to solar power. Better, but again, a lot of possible directions you could go. However, maybe you do a bit of research and discover several homes that utilize solar panels. If this strikes your fancy, your paper can be about the residential use of solar power. (And you could even focus down from there.)

A good rule of thumb to follow here is to say more about less. Go into more depth about a narrower topic rather than skimming along the surface. Your instructor will probably enjoy the paper more (and you probably will as well).

An added benefit of narrowing your topic is that it can make research a lot easier. If you have selected sustainable design as a topic, that covers a **lot** of information and a lot of resources, but narrowing it to residential solar use makes the research load much more manageable. It is easier to see where you have to look, which can save you hours of paging through unnecessary texts.

If you ever need any help in finding a paper's focus, Writing Consultants are available to help you talk out your idea. Sometimes taking 15 minutes to bounce your ideas off of someone can save you hours of library time. To schedule an appointment, call 617-585-0174 or send an email to writingcenter@the-bac.edu.

Types of Theses

- **Open Thesis:** A thesis that tells the reader only your position on a topic.

Boston is a better city than New York.

Advantages: You can hook the reader's attention and get him/her to read on.

- **Closed Thesis:** A thesis that tells the reader both your position and the reasons you feel that way.

Due to its more intimate size, European architecture, and historical significance, Boston is a far more interesting place to live than New York.

Advantages: Much more specific. Lays out the structure of your paper by listing your main points. Be aware that you have now told the reader: "These are my three points and this is the order I intend to present them." You have committed to a structure. So don't confuse the reader by starting with historical significance. Make sure you follow the path you have laid out.

There is no simple rule to follow as for when you should use an open vs. a closed thesis. One rule of thumb is to keep in mind the complexity of your topic. A more complex subject *may* require a more sophisticated thesis.

Ways to Build Thesis Statements

Sometimes as you narrow your topic, your thesis will suggest itself. At other times you have to do some work to figure out what it is. If you are still in the narrowing phase, the suggestions below may also assist you in that process.

Primarily you want to look for conflict. Identify issues over which people disagree.

- **Definition.** Do people have different opinions about exactly what defines something?

Organic architecture is....(fill in the blank)

This is a broad subject and many people (including many famous architects) have had different takes on it. What is yours?

- **Debate whether something is true or false, good or bad. What value does a statement have?** After all, different people often view the same issue from different sides.

Urban renewal in the 1960s helped redevelop Boston and turn it into the world-class city it is today.

Urban renewal in the 1960s drove 1000s of Bostonians from their homes, and turned the West End into the sterile wasteland it is today.

- **Debate how information is interpreted.**

An increasing number of urban professionals are moving back into the city, indicating dissatisfaction with suburban life.

The rush of urban professionals back into the city indicates a rediscovery of the conveniences of city living.

Same situation interpreted differently. Think about how there are always various proposals for the same site. Different architects have different visions for the same space. They have simply interpreted what the space needs differently.

- **Consider cause and effect.**

What causes what?

Last year was the warmest year on record, thus clearly indicating global warming is a growing problem.

Last year was the warmest year on record because of the effects of El Nino.

Last year was the warmest year on record, but one year doesn't indicate a trend; more research must be done about the earth's atmosphere and weather.

Ask yourself why something has happened and set out to explain why. Why has a particular form of architecture come to prominence? Why does a city have a particular "look"?

- **Policy. What should be done about something?**

Make a call for action.

Cities must allow for more open space and buildings that work better with their surroundings.

Architects must value service over all else when designing a building, even if this means compromising their own design integrity.

If you are trying to convince a client to adopt your design, in a sense you are putting forth a call for action.

PLEASE NOTE: The important thing about **all** of the above statements is that they are reasonably debatable.

Read over your statement of purpose. Make sure there is something to argue there.

At first glance, this may seem difficult. But it is possible to find something *reasonably* debatable about almost any topic.

Another way to think about it – instructors don't want to hear you parrot back information about a given topic. They want to hear your take on that given topic.

<p>For more information, please see tip sheets: <i>Introductions & Conclusions</i> and <i>Argument Structure</i>.</p>
