Writing a Thesis

A **thesis** is a brief, clear statement of the argument of the paper. It helps one plan a paper and divide the main ideas into subtopics.

Typical Thesis Statement Pattern

Topic + Attitude + Typically Two-Three Key Terms or General Phrases

Topic Is:
The general subject matter (Ex: *writing for pleasure, ice skating, going to the beach).*

Attitude Is:
- An informative or comparative method.
- An arguable position or opinion.
- The position taken for or against a subject.
- What the paper is trying to prove.

Main Points/Subtopics Are:
- Supporting ideas that will be discussed in more detail within the body of the paper.
- Directly related to the topic and included to support the writer's attitude.
    Ex: Cats are good pets because they are independent enough for an owner to work, cuddly enough to show affection, and clean enough not to require the work of visiting a groomer.

Advanced Thesis Pattern
This type of thesis statement may not include three specific points that correspond to three specific body paragraphs like the simple three-point form discussed above. In more advanced papers, especially in research papers, the topic may be too complex to categorize into three body paragraphs or main points.

Ex: The literary techniques used by Leo Tolstoy in *The Death of Ivan Ilych* unveil an extraordinary sense of depth within the novella that is imperative to truly understanding Tolstoy's ideas.

The paper will be discussing the literary techniques employed in this piece of literature, but they are not all listed in the thesis statement.

Thesis Statement Problems

Incomplete Thesis Statement

Ex 1: *Writing for pleasure is a good pastime.*

Problem: There are no supporting reasons or subtopics included. The reader cannot yet see what direction the paper will take and that there will be logical support and reasoning for the argument. To complete the thesis, the main points that will be discussed to support the statement should be included.

Improved Thesis: *Writing for pleasure is a good pastime because it helps release tension, allows for free expression, and sharpens communication skills.*

Topic: Writing for pleasure
Attitude: is a good pastime
Main points: - helps release tension
        - allows for free expression
        - sharpens communication skills

Ex 2: *Joe decided to become a writer when he was thirty-five years old.*

Problem: No attitude is taken toward the subject; the sentence is a statement of a fact rather than an argument of a position. The reader is left with questions such as, "So what if he decided to become a writer? What is the author going to say about it?" In reality, it is not a true thesis because there is no point being proved.

Improved Thesis**:** *At the age of thirty-five, when Joe decided to become a writer, the direction of his life changed forever; he had to leave a stable career, go back to college, and start over in an unfamiliar career field.*

Topic: Joe decided to become a writer
Attitude: the direction of his life changed forever
Main points: -left his stable career
        -to go back to college
        -and start over in an unfamiliar career field

Overly-Broad Thesis Statement

Ex 1: *When beginning an essay, being familiar with several brainstorming techniques is helpful.*

Problem: "Helpful" is a vague term that may leave the reader uncertain of exactly what is meant.

Improved Thesis: *When beginning an essay, being familiar with several brainstorming techniques is helpful because it gives the writer more resources for ideas, thereby decreasing occurrences of writer's block and allowing the writer to approach a topic from multiple perspectives. It enables a more complete investigation of the topic's possibilities.*

Ex 2: *William Shakespeare was a very talented playwright.*

Problem: This is a very general statement that lacks detail. There are many reasons why Shakespeare is considered a talented playwright, and to attempt to address them all in one paper is far too broad. The thesis should instead prove one specific aspect of his skill, using examples from a few different plays, or it could focus on three aspects of his skill as a playwright, seen in a particular play.

Improved Thesis: *William Shakespeare was a playwright skilled in intricate character development, as seen in the complexities of characters such as Hamlet, Macbeth, and Beatrice.*

Some Questions to Ask

• Could the thesis also be argued against? Can one identify specifically what the thesis is trying to prove? (This will show the writer whether or not s/he has taken a position or attitude in the thesis.)

• Could the thesis be clearer and more specific? Could it have a narrower, more specific focus? Ask the basic questions, "who, what, when, where, why, and how" to examine the thesis more in depth.

• Does the thesis give a brief overview of the main supporting points of the paper, mapping out the progression of ideas? (This will show whether or not the thesis is well organized.)