Developing a Thesis: Part I

A thesis statement is a sentence (or a few sentences) that states what an essay is about. A thesis statement should tell the reader what the essay’s topic is, give a general outline of the essay, and take a position on the topic that can be debated.

Myths about thesis statements:

- Thesis statements have to be one sentence
- Thesis statements have to have a three-pronged structure that sets up the three main body paragraphs
- Thesis statements should be the first part of the essay that you write
- Thesis statements must be placed at the end of the first paragraph
- The thesis statement should summarize your whole essay

A thesis statement can meet some of these criteria, but it does not have to.

Common problems with thesis statements:

The non-thesis thesis.
A thesis needs to take a position on an issue. It is different from a topic sentence in that a thesis statement is not neutral.

Bad: This paper will consider video game learning in the classroom.

Better: Video games represent a promising teaching tool in the classroom.

The incontestable thesis.
A thesis must be arguable. And in order for it to be arguable, it must present a view that someone might reasonably disagree with.

Bad: Students should not cheat.

Better: Cheating is not simply a problem in schools; it may affect people's future workplace behavior.

The overly broad thesis.
It is not possible to write a good college-level paper about the history of America in a five-page paper. An essay topic should be specific enough for you to address the topic thoroughly in the essay.

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Bad: Teachers need to stop students from cheating.

Better: New computer technology may be able to help teachers stop some forms of cheating.

The "list essay" thesis.
A good argumentative thesis provides not only a position on an issue, but also suggests the structure of the paper. The thesis should allow the reader to anticipate how the arguments will follow one another. A “list essay” just states a series of facts without connecting them in a logical order. Without a strong structure for the essay, different facts and paragraphs appear arbitrary and unrelated to one another.

Bad: There are many ways that video games could enhance education, including system thinking, collaborative tasks, and what James Paul Gee calls “situated meanings.”

Better: Among the many learning tools James Paul Gee cites in video games, the most significant ones—system thinking, collaborative tasks, and situated meanings—all share an emphasis on seeing information as a whole, rather than as disconnected facts typically presented in the classroom. [i]

[i] This section on the thesis statements was created by Mark Fullmer and is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 License.