The Guiding Idea and Argumentative Thesis Statement
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“The Guiding Idea and Argumentative Thesis Statement: How are they different? How are they used?” was written by Rhonda Dietrich.

Two Types of Essays

Your composition professor has given you an assignment, requiring you to write an essay in which you identify your favorite book and explain why you like it best. Later she assigns an essay in which you take a stand either for or against homeschooling. Both assignments require you to write a paper, yet the essays called for are in two different genres. Thus, you will need to present your views in two different ways.

Two Types of Main Point

Although these genres are different, they are similar in that both require your essay to have a main point. In fact, it is crucial that you have a central idea in both types of essay. Neither paper will be successful without it. It’s that important. It is also highly recommended that you present your main idea toward the end of your first paragraph, so readers will know at the onset what point you plan to make in your essay. It also should be around 1-2 sentences long. However, that’s where the similarity ends. As you will see, you need to present a guiding idea when discussing your favorite book; however, when taking a position on the controversial issue of homeschooling, you will have to present your point of view in an argumentative thesis statement. Let’s take a closer look at both ways of presenting the main point of an essay to get a better idea of why and how each is used.

The Guiding Idea

PURPOSE

It may seem that papers in which you state your favorite book, relate your most cherished memory, or describe your little sister don’t need a central idea. After all, you aren’t trying to convince anyone to vote for a certain political candidate or to ban smoking in public places. However, without a main point even these types of essays will have no coherence. The guiding idea provides this crucial ingredient. Without this expressly written main point, the paper will be unclear and unfocused, and readers will often be confused about the idea you are trying to get across.

CRITERIA

For the guiding idea to be effective it must be:

1. Clear: If readers can’t understand it, it is as if your paper doesn’t have one.
a. Example of a good guiding idea: *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone* is my favorite book because it includes a wide variety of characters. *Note: The sentence is clear and leaves no question in the reader’s mind regarding what the student wants to say in the essay.*

b. Example of an unclear guiding idea: *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone* is good, so I like it. *Note: The sentence is unclear because the reader doesn’t know if this is the student’s favorite book or why the student thinks it is “good.”*

2. Specific: If it contains vague words such as “good” and “things,” it will not be effective in getting your point across.

a. Example of a specific guiding idea: During the summer of my thirteenth year, I developed a passion for British Romantic poetry due to its celebration of nature. *Note: This makes clear what the writer’s main idea is. It is also likely to make the reader want to read on.*

b. Example of a vague guiding idea: During the summer of my thirteenth year, I learned that there are a lot of good things about Romantic poetry. *Note: The words “good things” are too vague to give the reader a clear understanding of the writer’s main point. The vague terms may also make the statement a little boring for the reader and may not entice him or her to read on.*

3. Simple to support. In other words, if it is presented unclearly, vaguely, or in an overly complex way, it will be very difficult to back it up effectively in the rest of the essay.

a. Example of a supportable guiding idea: If you follow these five easy steps, you will soon be enjoying a delicious piece of chocolate cake with your friends. *Note: Here the student only has to explain in detail each of these steps in order to support the central point of the essay.*

b. Example of an unsupportable guiding idea: Nobody likes baking cakes. *Note: There is nowhere to go in this paper. The writer doesn’t know everyone, so it would be impossible to prove this in the essay.*

**EXERCISE 1**

Click on [this link](http://writingcommons.org/information-literacy/understanding-arguments/the-guiding-idea-and-argumentative-thesis-statement) and read the paper. Underline the guiding idea and each statement in the paper that supports it. Then in a paragraph answer the following questions:

1. How clear is the guiding idea?

2. How well does the writer stay focused on it? Give examples from the paper to back up your answer.

3. Which supporting point sticks out to you? Why?

**The Argumentative Thesis Statement**

**PURPOSE**
On the other hand, if you want to convince your reader that your position on the issue of homeschooling or capital punishment is valid, you will need to present your point of view in an *argumentative thesis statement*. With this statement, you not only tell readers what you think about an issue, but you also let them know what you intend to prove in your paper. For this reason there is no need to explain to readers that you will back up your thesis in your essay. Setting out to prove the validity of your point of view as your paper continues marks the difference between stating an opinion and presenting an argument.

**CRITERIA**

Although the thesis statement's purpose is different from that of the guiding idea, the two are similar in some very important ways. Both express the writer's central idea or main point and, thus, need to be clear and specific. In addition, the two need to be written in a way that makes it possible for the writer to support them effectively. However, because the thesis statement presents an argument that must be convincing to readers, it needs to have some important characteristics of its own:

1. It must be logical and reasonable. Clearly, if you want to your reader to “listen” to what you have to say, you need to show that you have thought out your argument from all angles.
   
   a. Example of a reasonable thesis: The habit of bullying is caused by parental neglect. *Note: Whether or not the reader agrees, it seems like a reasonable claim and one that could be supported in the essay.*
   
   b. Example of an unreasonable thesis: All Democrats should be thrown out of the country. *Note: This thesis suggests an impossible solution to an unknown problem and, thus, cannot be supported.*

2. It must be controversial. This is often difficult for students who are used to writing reports on various subjects in high school. However, presenting a controversial main argument is crucial. If you don't need to convince your readers that your main point is valid, then you don’t have any reason to write a persuasion paper.
   
   a. Example of a controversial thesis: The Health Care Reform Act threatens our civil liberties. *Note: If you have watched the news lately, you know that many liberals and conservatives battle over this issue. Thus, no matter what position you choose, half of your readers will probably disagree with your stance, and you will definitely need to convince them that your view is valid.*
   
   b. Example of a non-controversial thesis: War is bad. *Note: Most readers would agree. Thus, the writer has no need to prove anything in the paper, and it will be boring to write and to read. Also, many times students who present this type of thesis find it very hard to fill the assigned number of pages.*

3. It must be provable. For your thesis statement to be effective, you must be able to prove its validity with supporting arguments and logical evidence. However, there are times when the thesis statement’s soundness cannot be proven.

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Saylor URL: http://www.saylor.org/courses/ENGL001/#2.2.1
a. Example of a provable thesis: The laws surrounding legalized physician-assisted suicide don’t go far enough in protecting doctors from prosecution. Note: This writer here can present case studies, quotes from experts, and strong supporting arguments to convince the reader that this argument is valid.

b. Example of an unsupportable thesis: Euthanasia is wrong. Note: There is no way to back up this thesis. It is impossible to prove the validity of statements that include value judgments such as “right,” “wrong,” “immoral,” “moral” etc.

4. It must be an opinion. This rule may seem obvious, but is sometimes difficult for students used to writing facts-based papers. Often they are convinced that putting an opinion in a paper constitutes bias and, thus, it should be avoided. However, hopefully, by now it has become clear that all effective arguments are based on opinions.

a. For an example of the effective opinion-based thesis, review the logical, controversial, and provable thesis statements given above. Note: Each one presents a personal viewpoint that will need to be backed up through supporting arguments and evidence in order to be convincing to readers.

b. Example of a fact-based thesis: There are many types of dogs. Note: This thesis presents a fact rather than an opinion; thus, the writer will simply report data concerning various dogs. There is no personal viewpoint that needs to be backed up by supportive evidence.

OTHER REQUIREMENTS OF THE ARGUMENTATIVE THESIS

While the list above provides many crucial criteria for the thesis, there are others that need to be mentioned briefly as well. Your thesis statement should never be in the form of a question, and it should always present your view and not someone else’s. Thus, always avoid quoting or paraphrasing someone in your thesis.

EXERCISE 2

Read each thesis statement below and determine if it is effective. If it isn't state, identify which of the characteristics discussed above that it violates.

Example: It is important to spay or neuter pets.
Answer: This thesis is not controversial.

1. Students who cheat on tests should be shot.
2. The Internet makes it easy to learn a lot of facts.
3. Cheating on income taxes is wrong.
4. Many people assign stereotypes to homosexuals out of fear.

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5. Penguins mostly live on the North Pole.