

# Planning Your Assignment Using a Thesis Statement

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Once you have a clear understanding of the assignment instructions, you are ready to move on to the next stage – developing your ideas on the topic. One of the most useful ways to develop and clarify your ideas is to formulate a thesis statement.

## What is a thesis statement?

A thesis statement is usually one concise sentence that tells readers what your argument is and how you plan to shed light on your topic. It traditionally occurs after a more general statement of introduction in the first paragraph of your essay. It may be useful to think of the thesis statement as a road map that familiarizes your reader with the territory that will be explored in the body of your essay. It is important to distinguish the thesis from the general topic or subject of your paper. For example, World War I might be your subject; however, your thesis should answer a specific question about World War I that can be both challenged by others and backed up with evidence. The thesis will vary in scope and complexity depending on the length of your paper. Any assignment that asks you to *analyze, interpret, argue, or compare and contrast* is asking you to develop a thesis and support it.

## How do I develop a thesis statement?

Often your assignment will help to narrow your topic, but the development of a strong thesis usually occurs during the process of researching and drafting your essay. While you gather information, you will begin to see relationships between or among known facts. These connections – whether contrasts or similarities – will help you to develop an opinion about your topic, and this will be the foundation for your “working thesis”, or basic argument.

There are many techniques for brainstorming that can help you to develop a “working thesis”. One approach is to ask yourself a number of “how” and “why” questions about an aspect of your topic that you find interesting or surprising or that you disagree with. What are the implications of your findings? Once you have some provocative questions, try answering some of them with persuasive or argumentative statements. Remember that such a statement will be a “working thesis”, meaning that it will need to be revised as you become more familiar with your sources and accumulate evidence both for and against your argument.

## How do I strengthen my thesis statement?

You can evaluate your thesis statement by asking the following questions:

- **Is my position contestable?** If everyone agrees with your argument then it will be more like a summary of well-known facts. If this is the case, your reader will likely judge it as weak. You can strengthen your thesis by anticipating and dismantling counter arguments throughout your essay.
- **Is it specific?** If you find vague words in your thesis statement like “interesting” or “important”, you should ask yourself why it is interesting or important and incorporate those specific reasons into your statement.
- **Is my thesis supported by my essay?** Often your essay will diverge slightly from your original thesis statement. If this happens, you can change your thesis to better reflect what you actually wrote.
- **Is my thesis clear?** After reading your introduction, will your reader be able to tell you what your essay is about? If not, you may need to use more specific and clear language. Try rephrasing your thesis statement out loud beginning with the words “My paper is about...” Is this the same as what you wrote? If you can’t explain your thesis statement out loud, then you should revise your written version.

## Example: the evolution of a thesis statement

Suppose you take a course on 20<sup>th</sup>-Century Canadian History, and your first assignment asks you to analyze the effects of World War I on Canadian nationalism. You sit down and write the following:

World War I affected Canadian nationalism in many ways.

This weak thesis tells the reader only that the topic of your paper is the effect of World War I on Canadian nationalism. Ask yourself questions about the topic: What was nationalism like before the war? How did it change after the war? Why? What is nationalism? Did all Canadians experience the same form of nationalism? As you begin to research these types of questions you will begin to develop an argument that will require a specific analysis. Through research you find out that the battle at Vimy Ridge was a defining moment of national pride during the war. You write:

The battle of Vimy Ridge in Northern France on April 9, 1917, where Canadian soldiers won more ground than the British ever had, was a defining moment that encouraged Canadian national pride.

Now you have narrowed your topic down to a specific event within World War I. As you continue to research, however, you find out that only English-speaking Canadian soldiers experienced this national pride. Why? This question may lead you to a stronger thesis because it is generally accepted that the victory at Vimy Ridge enhanced Canadian nationalism, so your above statement is still on the weak side. You write:

After the battle of Vimy Ridge, Canadian nationalism surged; however, even though English-speaking soldiers experienced a defining moment of national solidarity and pride, the minority group of French-speaking soldiers continued to oppose the war.

You would need to continue refining and strengthening this statement as you draft your essay, but it is a good “working” thesis from which to embark. You might ask yourself if other minority groups in Canada opposed the war, and you might begin to outline why you think minority groups continued to oppose the war. By continuing to question your thesis statement you will come up with a stronger argument, and a more resonant paper.

### Thesis Statement Checklist

You may spend a good deal of time drafting your thesis sentence and not feel certain that the statement is effective. This checklist will help you evaluate and revise the thesis sentence.

<b>Thesis Statement Checklist</b>		<b>Yes</b>	<b>Needs Work</b>
1.	<b>Is my position contestable?</b> If everyone agrees with your argument then it will be more like a summary of well-known facts. If this is the case, your reader will likely judge it as weak. You can strengthen your thesis statement by anticipating and dismantling counter arguments throughout your essay.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2.	<b>Is it specific?</b> If you find vague words in your thesis statement like “interesting” or “important”, you should ask yourself why it is interesting or important and incorporate those specific reasons into your statement.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
3.	<b>Is my thesis statement supported by my essay?</b> Often your essay will diverge slightly from your original thesis statement. If this happens, you can change your thesis statement to better reflect what you actually wrote.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
4.	<b>Is my thesis statement clear?</b> After reading your introduction, will your reader be able to tell you what your essay is about? If not, you may need to use more specific and clear language. Try rephrasing your thesis statement out loud beginning with the words “My paper is about...” Is this the same as what you wrote? If you can’t explain your thesis statement out loud, then you should revise your written version.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

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This resource has been adapted from “*Thesis Statements*”, one of a series of “Writing Tips” PDFs prepared by The Writing Centre, Learning and Teaching Centre, University of Victoria.