**Writing a Thesis Statement**

**What is a thesis statement?**

**A thesis statement:**

* tells the reader how you will interpret the significance of the subject matter under discussion.
* directly answers the question asked of you. A thesis is an interpretation of a question or subject, not the subject itself. The subject, or topic, of an essay might be World War II or Moby Dick; a thesis must then offer a way to understand the war or the novel.
* makes a claim that others might dispute.
* is usually a single sentence found at the end of the first paragraph that presents your argument to the reader. (The rest of the paper, the body of the essay, gathers and organizes evidence that will persuade the reader of the logic of your interpretation.)

**How do I get a thesis?**

A thesis is the result of a lengthy thinking process. Formulating a thesis is not the first thing you do after reading the research paper assignment. Before you develop an argument on any topic, you have to start collecting and organizing evidence, look for possible relationships between known facts (such as surprising contrasts or similarities), and think about the significance of these relationships. Once you do this thinking, you will probably have a “working thesis,” a basic or main idea, an argument that you think you can support with evidence but that may need adjustment along the way.

\*To formulate your thesis for this assignment, you have to begin reading your books through a lens. (Pick a lens you think will fit best)

**How do write a thesis statement?**

Follow this easy formula:

TOPIC + OPINION + HOW/WHY = THESIS STATEMENT

**How do I know if my thesis is strong?**

When reviewing your first draft and its working thesis, ask yourself the following:

* + *Do I answer the question?* Re-reading the question prompt after constructing a working thesis can help you fix an argument that misses the focus of the question.
  + *Have I taken a position that others might challenge or oppose?* If your thesis simply states facts that no one would, or even could, disagree with, it’s possible that you are simply providing a summary, rather than making an argument.
  + Is my thesis statement specific enough?

Thesis statements that are too vague often do not have a strong argument. If your thesis contains words like “good” or “successful,” see if you could be more specific: *why* is something “good”; *what specifically* makes something “successful”?

* *Does my thesis pass the “So what?” test?* If a reader’s first response is, “So what?” then you need to clarify, to forge a relationship, or to connect to a larger issue.
* *Does my essay support my thesis specifically and without wandering?* If your thesis and the body of your essay do not seem to go together, one of them has to change. It’s o.k. to change your working thesis to reflect things you have figured out in the course of writing your paper. Remember, always reassess and revise your writing as necessary.
* *Does my thesis pass the “how and why?” test?* If a reader’s first response is “how?” or “why?” your thesis may be too open-ended and lack guidance for the reader. See what you can add to give the reader a better take on your position right from the beginning.

**\*Please remember that your thesis will evolve as you write your paper. You may even find that your thesis has changed completely from the beginning to the end. ☺**

**For example…**

Suppose you are taking a course on 19th-century America, and the instructor hands out the following essay assignment: Let’s look at another example. Suppose your literature professor hands out the following assignment in a class on the American novel: Write an analysis of some aspect of Mark Twain’s novel Huckleberry Finn. “This will be easy,” you think. “I loved Huckleberry Finn!” You grab a pad of paper and write:

*Mark Twain’s Huckleberry Finn is a great American novel.*

Why is this thesis weak?

Think about what the reader would expect from the essay that follows: you will most likely provide a general, appreciative summary of Twain’s novel. The question did not ask you to summarize; it asked you to analyze. Your professor is probably not interested in your opinion of the novel; instead, she wants you to think about *why* it’s such a great novel—what do Huck’s adventures tell us about life, about America, about coming of age, about race relations, etc.? First, the question asks you to pick an aspect of the novel that you think is important to its structure or meaning—for example, the role of storytelling, the contrasting scenes between the shore and the river, or the relationships between adults and children. Now you write:

*In Huckleberry Finn, Mark Twain develops a contrast between life on the river and life on the shore.*

Here’s a working thesis with potential: you have highlighted an important aspect of the novel for investigation; however, it’s still not clear what your analysis will reveal. Your reader is intrigued, but is still thinking, “So what? What’s the point of this contrast? What does it signify?” Perhaps you are not sure yet, either. That’s fine—begin to work on comparing scenes from the book and see what you discover. Free write, make lists, jot down Huck’s actions and reactions. Eventually you will be able to clarify for yourself, and then for the reader, why this contrast matters. After examining the evidence and considering your own insights, you write:

*Through its contrasting river and shore scenes, Twain’s Huckleberry Finn suggests that to find the true expression of American democratic ideals, one must leave “civilized” society and go back to nature.*

This final thesis statement presents an interpretation of a literary work based on an analysis of its content. Of course, for the essay itself to be successful, you must now present evidence from the novel that will convince the reader of your interpretation.