

WRITING THESIS STATEMENTS

Upon successful completion of this lesson, you should be able to:

- distinguish an arguable thesis from a statement of fact
- write an arguable thesis statement
- write a thesis statement and supporting arguments that logically align
- revise a thesis statement so that it aligns with existing supporting arguments

PART 1: ARGUABLE THESES VERSUS STATEMENTS OF FACT

In Parts 2 and 3 of this lesson, you will explore two different approaches you can use to write a thesis statement. First, however, you must understand the difference between an arguable thesis and a statement of fact.

Your readers—especially your professors—want to read writing that engages them. Consequently, you must write thesis statements that are arguable, not factual.

A statement of fact is a statement that cannot be argued—at least not logically. Students often write statements of fact instead of arguable theses when they are struggling to embrace a topic. Statements of fact *seem* easy to write about because, well, they are easy to prove. After all, they're facts. The problem is that most students cannot write engaging papers around statements of fact. Such theses prevent students from demonstrating critical thinking ability and analytical skills, which professors want to see.

Statements of fact are statements of common knowledge; therefore, writing papers about them prevents students from demonstrating important academic abilities. Consider the statements below.

Smoking can cause health problems.

Small cars get better fuel mileage than 4x4 pickup trucks.

On average, people with college degrees earn more money in the workplace.

Foul language is common in movies.

If you were to write a paper around any of the above statements, your writing would probably be quite dull because you would be restating facts that the general public already knows.

In order to make your writing interesting and engaging, you should develop thesis statements that are arguable. Sometimes you will be writing to persuade others to see things your way. Other times you will simply be making an opinionated statement and laying out your case. Whatever the occasion, your thesis statement should state your

position on a debatable issue. In other words, when you write a thesis statement, you take a stand about something.

Suppose one of the general *topics* listed on the previous page interests you. You could still write about it—you might just have to change your approach so that your thesis statement is arguable. Consider:

Statement of fact: *Smoking can cause health problems.*

Arguable thesis statement: *The government should ban smoking altogether.*

Statement of fact: *Small cars get better fuel mileage than 4x4 pickup trucks.*

Arguable thesis statement: *The government should ban 4x4 pickup trucks except for work-related use.*

Statement of fact: *On average, people with college degrees earn more money in the workplace.*

Arguable thesis statement: *A college degree should not be required for the _____ profession.*

Statement of fact: *Foul language is common in movies.*

Arguable thesis statement: *The amount of foul language in movies is disproportionate to the amount of foul language in real life.*

Any given individual might agree or disagree with some or all of the revised statements above, and the evidence used to support or challenge the statements would be different from writer to writer. The point is that a writer who supported or challenged one of these theses would have to *think* in order to make his or her case. With a statement of fact, a writer simply puts on paper what has already been established by other people. An arguable thesis, on the other hand, requires a writer to think about which supporting arguments best challenge the other side of the issue. It is this type of thinking that resonates with your professors.

Exercise 1

The following exercise contains hypothetical thesis statements. On the blank line beside each statement, write “A” if the statement is arguable or “F” if the statement is a statement of fact.

_____ 1. The amount of financial aid available to students should be proportionate to the earning potential of the career fields for which their majors prepare them.

_____ 2. Tom Hanks should have won the Best-Actor award for his performance in *Castaway*.

_____ 3. Frank Sinatra was loved and admired by many people.

- _____4. The United States contains citizens of many different ethnicities.
- _____5. Sterling College should make coffee available to students in every building.
- _____6. Driving under the influence of alcohol is dangerous.
- _____7. Penalties for drinking and driving should be more severe.
- _____8. Television networks air a lot of reality shows nowadays.
- _____9. The *Harry Potter* movies are better than the *Indiana Jones* movies.
- _____10. Steroid abuse can lead to serious health problems.

Exercise 2

Write three (3) to five (5) arguable thesis statements.

PART 2: WRITING AN ARGUABLE AND NARROW THESIS STATEMENT AROUND AN ISSUE THAT EXCITES YOU

Because you're a living, breathing human being, you have strong feelings about some things. Maybe you've played a sport all of your life, had many good experiences within that sport, and consequently care deeply about it. Or perhaps you've lost a loved one to a rare disease and feel strongly that public awareness about that disease should increase. Because God gave us emotions, we care about things.

Often, especially in writing courses, students are told to "write about what they know." When assignments are relatively open ended and students are permitted to write thesis statements that are not merely restatements of essay questions, their knowledge and passion about topics close to their heart can enhance their writing. However, some students have a difficult time developing a good thesis statement from a general topic or issue, even if they care a great deal about the subject.

Consider, for example, a student who is asked to write a paper about anything having to do with communication. The student is attending college on a baseball scholarship, and he would love to connect baseball to the subject of communication so that he does not die of boredom while working on the assignment. However, the only association he can make between the two subjects has to do with the non-verbal signals that coaches give to their players. On the day his thesis is due, the student submits the following sentence to his instructor:

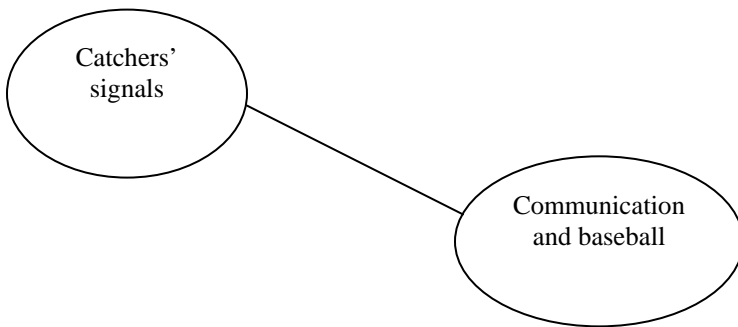
Hand signals are an important part of baseball.

Perhaps the instructor should use more tact, but in the margin beside the student's thesis statement, she writes, "No duh! This is a statement of fact. Try again."

When the instructor returns the paper a couple of days later, she sits down with the student and helps him think through the assignment. After helping him see why his current thesis is a statement of fact, she then helps him brainstorm some ideas. She begins by having him write “communication and baseball” in a circle on a blank sheet of paper. Then, sensitive to the student’s desire to connect the assignment topic to his favorite sport, she asks, “What other types of communication are associated with baseball?”

The student thinks for a moment—but not too long, for he knows baseball well. “Catchers flash signals to pitchers so they can agree on what type of pitch will be thrown.”

“Okay,” replies the instructor. “Write ‘catchers’ signals’ in a circle and connect it to the first.”



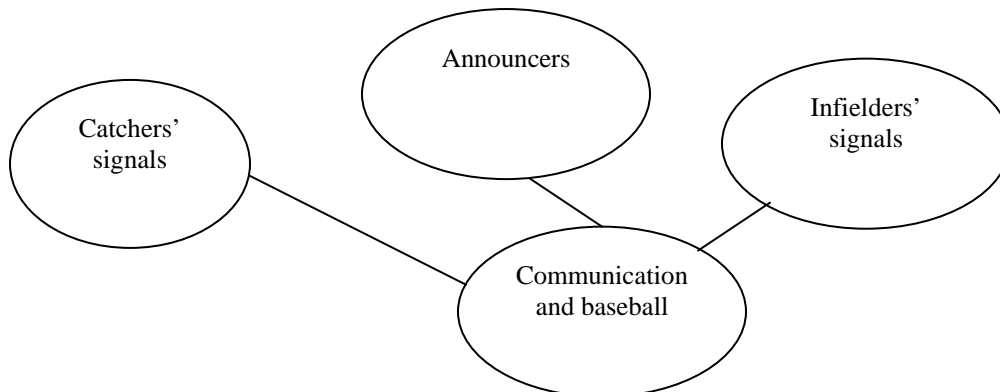
“What else?” asks the instructor.

“Well, infielders sometimes communicate with each other with secret hand signals.”

“Okay” says the instructor. “Write that in another circle. But you’re still thinking about the *players*. How else does communication relate to baseball?”

“Announcers communicate,” says the student.

“Now you’re thinking. Write that down, too.”



After a few moments of silence, the student says, “I’m thinking of something that has a definite connection to communication but only a loose connection to baseball.”

“That’s okay,” the instructor replies. “We’re brainstorming. And remember: the assignment topic is communication—not baseball. You’re thinking about baseball because you want to make the assignment interesting for yourself. What’s your idea?”

“Earlier in the summer I saw a commercial for a piece of equipment that I thought would help make me a better player. I saved my money and bought it, but it was the biggest rip-off I’ve ever seen. The commercial was completely misleading. I was thinking of writing ‘baseball product advertising’ in another circle.”

“Now you’re really thinking,” says the instructor.

The student is not even finished writing the words when he has an even more developed idea. “You know, since I bought that piece of equipment, I’ve often wondered about how many people are misled by false advertising.”

The instructor grins, sensing that the student is getting closer to a good thesis statement.

“I mean, false advertising obviously works, or there would not be so much of it,” the student continues. “Maybe something should be done about it.”

The instructor’s grin changes to a smile. “What do you think should be done?”

“I don’t know. Maybe our high schools need to teach lessons about how to recognize false advertising.”

“It sounds as though you have a thesis statement,” encourages the instructor.

The student thinks for a moment. “So my thesis would be that *high school curriculums should include instruction about how to recognize false advertising?* It’s not really about baseball.”

“No, it’s not,” the instructor laughs. “Again: the assignment is not about baseball—it’s about communication. Advertising is certainly a type of communication, and you’ve drawn from a baseball experience to arrive at an arguable thesis. Moreover, your experience of being ‘ripped off’ will enhance your paper.”

Not every struggling writer will arrive at a thesis statement as the hypothetical student did, but the story emphasizes the value of brainstorming a topic that’s close to your heart. When statements are either factual or too general, brainstorming can help you narrow your topic and write a statement that is arguable.

Some educators might have good reasons for *not* teaching about false advertising in high schools. Perhaps the curriculum is already too full and adding another subject would steal

important instructional time from other subjects. Perhaps teachers would need to be trained to recognize false advertising before they could teach students how to recognize it. Nevertheless, the student would be making a legitimate contribution to the “world of ideas.”

Notice that the student avoided a thesis statement such as *there is a lot of false advertising on television*. Such a statement would be a statement of fact; therefore, a paper supporting that thesis would be uninteresting. Instead, the student decided to approach a familiar topic from a slightly new angle. By arguing that instruction about false advertising should be included in high school curriculums, the student adds a new twist to an old issue.

As you go further and further into your major field of study, your thesis statements will inevitably need to be narrower. Don't let this frighten you. As you become more of an expert in your field, you will encounter “micro” issues that stir emotions in your soul and evoke strong reactions.

Exercise 3

Each item below contains a general subject and a narrower subject that is derivative of it. Write an arguable thesis statement for each group of words in the column labeled “Narrower Topic.”

	General Topic	Narrower Topic	Thesis Statement
1.	education	distance education	?
2.	communication	the difference in people's voices	?
3.	work	paid vacation time	?
4.	dishonesty	cheating in sports	?
5.	community	volunteerism	?
6.	television	reality shows	?
7.	relationships	fathers and sons	?
8.	newspapers	college newspapers	?
9.	family	eating together	?
10.	criminal justice	treatment of inmates	?

PART 3: WRITING OR REVISING A THESIS STATEMENT TO ALIGN WITH SUPPORTING ARGUMENTS

Every thesis statement has to have supporting arguments, usually three to five of them. You can think of the main ideas in supporting arguments as mini-thesis statements. Consider, for example, the following:

THESIS STATEMENT

- The cafeteria management is doing a good job.

Without supporting arguments, the statement above is simply an opinion. It is also an opinion even with supporting arguments, but it is an opinion with an argument that supports it.

SUPPORTING ARGUMENTS

- Cafeteria hours accommodate every student's schedule.
- The cafeteria offers a variety of main courses at each meal.
- The cafeteria serves plenty of food that is both healthy and tasty.
- The cafeteria has been citation free for over two years.

The four statements above offer evidence that cafeteria management is doing a good job. If this were a thesis statement for an assignment, the bulk of the paper would provide evidence for the four supporting arguments. For example, one paragraph might "prove" the cafeteria is open to accommodate every student's schedule by including the earliest times that students need in the cafeteria, the latest times, and the fact that the cafeteria is open during those times.

Occasionally, students have thought so much about the rights or wrongs of an issue that they write (or at least develop in their minds) closely related supporting arguments *before* they write a precise thesis statement. For instance, a student might have strong feelings about the imperfections of higher education. Having thought about those imperfections a great deal, he or she might have well reasoned criticisms but lack a thesis. His or her criticisms might be:

- Far too much writing is required in college.
- A college degree takes too long to earn.
- Students should not be required to take so many general education courses.

There is nothing wrong with writing a paper from this approach; that is, writing a thesis statement *after* you have developed supporting arguments. However, *the thesis statement must logically align with all supporting arguments*. A thesis statement that "covers" the supporting arguments above might read:

- Reform in higher education should start with some of the most common practices and assumptions.

Other times, students are passionate about a thesis statement and know exactly what they want their supporting arguments to be. They write feverishly and develop their supporting arguments well. Somewhere in the writing process, however, they wander slightly from the thesis statement. Perhaps one or two supporting arguments align well with the thesis statement, but another one goes in a different direction.

Consider the student who believes that cheating in baseball is worse than it is in other sports. His thesis statement reads:

While cheating has become epidemic in most sports, the win-at-all-costs mentality is even more extreme in baseball because baseball players often risk injury to themselves—not just opposing players—so they or their teams can have an advantage.

After reading the student's thesis statement, the instructor is intrigued. This could be a fairly original argument.

The instructor reads on and is satisfied with the first supporting argument, which is that *batters sometimes intentionally lean in to fastballs so they will be hit by a pitch and consequently be awarded first base*. This argument certainly supports the idea that baseball players will risk injury to cheat.

The student's second argument also makes sense. He explains how *base runners risk personal injury when they disregard the rule of sliding straight into a base so they can "take out" a fielder trying to make a play*.

While the paper so far is not God's gift to literature, the instructor is happy that the student has made an original argument and has logically supported his thesis with two supporting points.

Then the instructor reads the third supporting point:

Baseball players also take health risks when they use steroids.

While this statement is certainly true, it does not connect logically to the student's thesis. Remember, the student is arguing that cheating is worse in *baseball*. Do you see the alignment problem? Steroid abuse is not a problem that is exclusive to baseball. Since steroids are used by athletes in other sports as well, the student's third supporting argument actually weakens his overall argument.

The student had a slight glitch in his thought process. He was excited about having a good thesis, and he ran with his idea because the first two supporting arguments came to his mind right away. Unfortunately for the student, the instructor required *three* supporting arguments for the assignment, and the third did not come as easily. To be sure,

it is closely related to the first two, but it is not logical evidence for the thesis the student has written. Consequently, the student is docked a few points because of his third supporting argument.

College writers often make mistakes like the one described above. Luckily, they need not be docked points, for a simple solution is usually only a short revision away. In the example above, the student could have earned a better grade by keeping the same supporting arguments (and probably adding one) and simply revising his thesis statement. Instead of using the thesis statement

While cheating has become epidemic in most sports, the win-at-all-costs mentality is even more extreme in baseball because baseball players often risk injury to themselves—not just opposing players—to give themselves or their teams an advantage,

the student could have revised his thesis to read:

The win-at-all-costs mentality is so pervasive in sports that athletes often risk injury to themselves—not just opposing players—so they or their teams can have an advantage.

With the revised thesis statement, all of the supporting arguments make sense. Of course, the student would want to add a supporting argument or two that revolves around other sports, since the thesis has been revised to address all athletics. **The point is that it often takes only a little thought and a little revision to make sure that thesis statements and supporting arguments logically align.**

EXERCISE 4

Write two arguable thesis statements, each with at least three supporting arguments. They do not need to be complicated. The important thing is that your thesis and supporting arguments logically align.

Example:

Thesis: Random drug testing should not be allowed in high schools.

Supporting Arguments:

1. It is a violation of privacy.
2. It wastes taxpayer money because most students know how to “cheat” on the tests.
3. It instills unnecessary fear in students and consequently affects their academic performance in a negative way.

EXERCISE 5

Listed with the two thesis statements below are possible supporting arguments. Within each group of possible supporting arguments, one (1) does not align logically with the thesis. Circle each supporting argument that does not align.

1. The media should be as hard on non-players as they are on players when it comes to cheating in baseball.
 - Gamblers do a lot of damage to the game.
 - Fans steal signals from opposing teams and relay them to players and coaches.
 - Non-starting players also steal signals.
 - Groundskeepers have been known to “fix” fields for a home-team advantage.

2. Kansas is a great place to live.
 - The state has great roads and traffic is seldom congested.
 - Kansas City offers many fun attractions, especially east of State Line Road.
 - It has many community colleges that enhance local economies.
 - Kansans have a rich history of looking out for one another.

EXERCISE 6

Revise the thesis statements in Exercise 5 above so that they “cover” all four of the supporting arguments.