

How to write a thesis statement

What is a thesis statement anyway?

Think of it as a statement of the **main over-arching point** that you want to make in your research paper as a result of what you have found out in the course of your research.

It helps to think of why you were doing “research” in the first place: there was something you wanted to know that you didn’t know. In other words, you had a “**research question**”.

Such as?

For example, you might in an English paper be **asking why** in Shakespeare’s play Hamlet *delays* his revenge on his uncle for the death of his father. Or in a more political-type paper, maybe in Politics, or even in ENGL 115, you might **be asking if** the Canadian government was justified in contributing troops to the NATO-led force in Afghanistan.

And then what do I do?

In the case of the Shakespeare question, you would then read the relevant parts of the play (again) perhaps, copy down what seem to you to be useful quotations.

You then should probably read what some other critics have said on this much-analysed topic, in academic journal articles or books. There will be a variety of issues raised. You could note down a couple of the positions of these critics to help you situate your own approach in the existing scholarship. As you read you might find yourself interested in the discussions around the notion of “uncertainty”: the status of Hamlet’s knowledge/lack of knowledge about his father’s death. You might even then consider what we mean by *knowing*. You might even have a look at what philosophers and literary theorists, have said about knowledge, certainty and uncertainty. You would probably go back to the play to read parts again in the light of your new-found knowledge, and note what seems relevant to quote.

And...?

At the end of your research process you might have decided that, from the evidence you have accumulated, the best explanation for Hamlet’s delay lies in the fact that he is unable to determine what forms a reasonable level of certainty about what happened at these events in the past, at which he was not present. He thinks his uncle is guilty, and wants to exact revenge, but at the same time he is not certain, and not sure how to act as a result.

You have now answered your research question: that is, you have a *thesis*, in that you have taken *an arguable position with regard to a worthwhile issue*.

OK – but I’m still not sure what a thesis statement is...

All that remains now is to form that idea, that answer to your research question, into a **clear statement: a sentence or two that explains your argument, or thesis**. Conventionally you will place this at **the end of your introduction** so that your reader knows how to read what is coming.

Can you give me an example?

How about this:

Hamlet's inability to act in pursuit of revenge against Claudius arises from his requirement for proof of guilt, which takes him out of the realm of emotional certainty and into the realm of interpretation and uncertainty: he cannot act because he cannot *know* what happened.

Or in the case of the political question:

Canada was bound by its treaty obligations to its NATO partner to support the Afghanistan operation; however, the decision to take on responsibility for the troubled Khandahar province was a mistake, driven more by the military's ambition to prove itself in a "real" war than by Canada's national interest.

In both cases there are alternative viewpoints. Like Hamlet himself we are never going to get to the bottom of questions like these. Hamlet's motivation has been discussed for 400 years, and will go on being discussed as long as the play is read. You are making an argument, an attempt at answering these important questions. Your essay is just one statement in what you can think of as a great academic debate. You've listened to what scholars said before you, than you had your say. Other scholars might read what you have written and have their ideas affected. They might come back with a response that deals with an aspect you failed to. No one gets the last word. The word "essay" derives from the French verb "essayer": to try, to make an attempt. In the end that is all that you can do.

What shouldn't I do?

Your thesis statement **should not** be in the form of a question:

The play prompts the question, why does Hamlet delay his revenge?

Your thesis statement **should not** just list the issues your paper will cover (though you might do that too):

This paper will cover Hamlet's relationship with his father, the question of inheritance, Claudius's relationship with Gertrude, and the role of the play within the play.

Your thesis statement should be arguable, therefore it **should not** be a statement of the obvious or the trivial:

Shakespeare's *Hamlet* shows that revenge is bad for people.

Exercise

- Let's consider a RESEARCH QUESTION. How about "What is the effect on students of study abroad programmes at universities?"
- Let's do a MIND-MAP to try and figure out what the issues are... In what ways might a student be advantaged? On the other hand, might there be some ways in which this could work against them? We might consider issues like completion rates, grades, salaries five years after graduation, or a sense of personal growth even...
- ...OK, done. Now let's imagine that we have done some research into these aspects, and found some data, some evidence to help us decide where we stand on this issue. Overall, on balance, do we think it a plus or a minus, and WHY?
- We have just generated a thesis. Now hone it into a clear THESIS STATEMENT. You can use a phrase like "This essay will argue that....", then deliver your thesis. Then you can delete the "This essay argues that" part because you will see that it is now obvious what your essay is arguing – or it should be. I say this, even though I see nothing wrong with "this essay argues that" as a signpost, and it appears often in academic articles. BUT some profs think it clunky.