

I. THE INTRODUCTION: The introduction is usually one paragraph, or perhaps two in a paper of eight pages or more. Its purpose is to: (1) set out the problem to be discussed; (2) define key terms that will be used in that discussion; (3) outline the structure of the argument; (4) CLEARLY STATE THE THESIS.

A. Suggestions for the introduction:

Establish the problem/historical context: Quickly established the issue your paper confronts. Where and when are we? What are we examining? It is especially important to clearly define the limits of your exploration. If you are discussing the life of Frederick Douglass, it will not suffice to establish the setting by referring to the "days of slavery," since slavery has existed in all times all over the world. Frederick Douglass was a slave in Maryland in the decades before the Civil War. Do not begin a history paper with absurdly general phrases like, "since the beginning of time," or "humans have always. . . ." Get as specific as necessary as early as possible.

Catch the reader's attention. You might start with an example, a quotation, a statistic, or a complaint. Be sure that this opening theme runs through your paper. Do not abandon this theme. You can use it again later to help unify your paper.

Provide a subtle blueprint (or "road map") for the paper. Let your reader know where you are headed (how you plan to tackle the subject) without giving away your best ideas. If, for instance, your paper breaks down into political, social, and cultural components, telegraph this to your reader so she will know what to expect.

B. The thesis:

The last function of the introduction is to present your thesis. This is so important to your paper that it merits lengthy consideration -- please see my handout on this topic. The biggest problem with student papers is that they contain no true thesis. The second biggest problem with student papers is that the thesis is vague and ill-defined.

How the thesis fits in the introductory paragraph: The thesis statement is the one-sentence version of your argument. The thesis thus presents your reader with new information. But a good thesis will require you to introduce the concepts in it before presenting the thesis itself. That is the task of the introductory paragraph. The following introductory paragraph presents a thesis that relies on concepts which have not been properly defined and clarified:

Since the beginning of time humans have owned one another in slavery. This brutal institution was carried to its fullest extent in the United States in the years between the American Revolution and the Civil War. Slaveholders treated their slaves as chattel, brutalizing them with the whip and the lash. The law never recognized the humanity of the slave, and similarly regarded him as property. Consequently, there was a big disparity between private and public rights of slaves.

This thesis presents two words -- "private" and "public" rights -- that are not even

mentioned earlier in the paragraph. What are these things? This paragraph does nothing to establish the distinction. Instead, it is a bland statement of theme which provides little background for the thesis. Thus, when we do read the thesis, it seems to float -- the premises underlying it have not been established. Compare the last introductory paragraph with this one:

To many supporters of slavery, the nature of slave rights had a dual character. On the one hand, in order to maintain the total dominance of the white master class, the law denied any rights to slaves. Publicly, the slave was merely property, and not human at all. Yet the personal records of many planters suggest that slaves often proved able to demand customary "rights" from their masters. In the privacy of the master-slave relationship, the black man did indeed have rights which the white man was bound to respect, on pain of losing his labor or subjecting himself to violence. This conflict between slaves' lack of "public" rights and masters' "private" acknowledgment of slaves' rights undermined planters' hegemony and permitted slaves to exert a degree of autonomy and freedom within an oppressive institution.

Note how quickly this paragraph lays the groundwork for the thesis. It is clearly structured around two competing concepts -- public and private rights -- which are then incorporated into the thesis. Nearly every element of the thesis is established in the preceding paragraph, yet the thesis itself is not a restatement of the paragraph. This paragraph even tells the reader what sources will be consulted: planters' personal records. Note finally that, in contrast to the previous paragraph, the reader now has a strong sense of what the paper will need to argue to prove its thesis.

II. CONCLUSION: This is usually one paragraph long, and briefly recapitulates your thesis, pulling all your arguments together. The first sentence of the concluding paragraph is a clear, specific re-statement of thesis. The conclusion should do more than simply re-state the argument.

- It also suggests why the argument is important in the bigger scheme of things, or suggests avenues for further research, or raises a bigger question.
- It makes connections to other time periods, civilizations, or cultures.

Thesis Statements

What is a thesis statement?

- tells the reader **how you will interpret the significance** of the subject matter under discussion.
- is a **road map** for the paper; in other words, it tells the reader what to expect from the rest of the paper.
- **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** that is the last sentence in the intro. 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 an essay assignment. Before you develop an argument on any topic, you have to collect and organize 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.

How do I know if my thesis is strong?

If there's time, run it by your instructor or make an appointment at the Writing Center to get some feedback. Even if you do not have time to get advice elsewhere, you can do some thesis evaluation of your own. 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.

Format:

A three-point thesis statement will list the three key reasons used in the body of the essay. By listing these reasons in the thesis, readers will know what to expect in the body of the essay. A three-point thesis statement will also help keep novice writers on track. That is, the topic sentence of each body paragraph should relate directly back to a segment of the thesis statement. The order of the paragraphs should follow the order the reasons were introduced in the thesis statement.

Ex. *The Neolithic Revolution is a key turning point in history because people learned how to farm and domesticate animals, built permanent settlements, and formed civilizations.*

Example prompt:

Theme: Human and Physical Geography

Throughout history, geographic features have influenced the development of civilizations and regions. Geographic features have both promoted and limited interactions with other civilizations and regions.

Task: Select two different geographic features and for each

- Discuss how this geographic feature influenced the development of a specific civilization or region
- Discuss how this geographic feature promoted and/or limited the interaction of this civilization or region with another civilization or region

"Working Thesis"	Is this a well-constructed thesis or does it need more work? (What's your general impression)	What are the topics/specifics that the author will talk about (i.e. topics/specific for body paragraph 1, for body paragraph 2, body paragraph 3...)	Weaknesses?
<i>Sample:</i> Geography impacted different regions.			
<i>Sample:</i> The geographic features of rivers and mountains impacted of different civilizations and empires development.			

<p><i>Sample:</i> The geographic features of rivers and mountains impacted Ancient Egypt and Ancient Greece.</p>			
<p><i>Sample:</i> Ancient Greece's mountainous terrain led to division with city-states while its coastline allowed for a thriving trade with other civilizations.</p>			
<p><i>Sample:</i> The Gobi Desert in China and the Himalayan & Hindu Kush Mountains in India both created barriers that allowed Ancient civilizations to thrive without outside interference.</p>			

YOUR TURN! Write a thesis statement for the prompt below.

THEMATIC ESSAY QUESTION

Throughout history, many cultures have experienced a Golden Age when great advances were made in a variety of different fields.

- Identify two different cultures that experienced a Golden Age.
- Describe the specific achievements of each culture identified.
- Explain how these achievements continue to influence the modern world.

Suggestions: Athens in the 5th century BCE, the Gupta Dynasty in India, the Islamic world from the 8th through the 12th centuries, the Tang Dynasty in China, the Heian Period in Japan