

Do I Really Need a Thesis Statement?

Unpacking One of Students' Most Hated Phrases

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You've just received an assignment that asks you to make an argument with a clear thesis statement. If you are anything like how I was during college, that phrase may trigger a sense of dread or even a sarcastic eyeroll. What does that even mean, and do I really need it?

What is it?

A thesis statement is a clear sentence that states your argument in a paper. It communicates to the reader what the paper will be about, and also provides some clues for how the paper will be organized.

Keep in mind that your thesis statement is not the same thing as your argument. Your argument is the idea or position you are putting forth throughout the paper, and your thesis statement is one or two sentences that states that idea clearly. You want to phrase this statement clearly enough that your reader *cannot* misunderstand the point you are trying to make. The reader should have no doubt what your paper is about after reading your thesis statement.

Where does it go?

Whereas your argument will be stated and reinforced throughout the paper, the 1-2 sentence thesis statement should appear in your introduction. This placement is important because the entire purpose for having this statement is to clear up any confusion in your reader. When the reader knows what you're trying to say, they will have an easier time following along with the rest of the paper. They will be able to anticipate the point you are going to make with each new idea and, even better, will be able to see the significance of the points to your bigger argument.

My favorite quote about the placement of thesis statements is from Howard Becker, an American sociologist, in his book *Writing for Social Scientists* (2007): "The paper begins by stating what it later demonstrates." In other words, your thesis statement appears at the beginning in order to make clear what you will be demonstrating later.

Are thesis statements universal?

No! Thesis statements are a decidedly Western convention inherent to Academic English. Academic writing in other languages and from other cultures may not need or even encourage thesis statements. The reason has to do with cultural traditions about information, communication, and interaction. The United States is highly individualistic and privileges directness as a way for the author to impose their idea onto the reader, even if only temporarily. As such, academic papers in the United States communicate individual understanding and originality, and therefore each individual writer is expected to be direct and clear in their meaning. Other cultures and languages, such as Mainland Chinese, privilege a more indirect style of communication, where the writer and reader do not need to reach the same conclusion from a paper and, as such, the reader can interpret the text for themselves. In this tradition, academic papers show the relationships between different ideas and imply the bigger picture, without imposing an argument onto the reader.