Thesis Statements and Topic Sentences

Thesis Statements
A thesis is the main idea of a paper—the one thing you want your reader to know by the end of your paper. The thesis is both the target and destination for everything that is included in the paper. Each paragraph should work toward either explaining or defending the thesis.

When writing a thesis statement, include two things: what and why. The what explains what a paper is going to discuss, argue, or conclude. This part of the thesis should be specific. The why explains why this topic is significant—why the idea is being discussed or argued, and it may comment on how this matters in the long run. Below are a few examples of theses that include both what and why:

Research Paper: Colleges should install water bottle refill stations [what] because they will improve their own educational environment by eliminating plastic waste, provide healthier alternatives to sugary and caffeinated drinks, and help solve the global climate crisis [why].

Literary Paper: In The Hunger Games, Katniss Everdeen is a strong female character [what] whose cunning, determination, and leadership allow her to survive the games and help overthrow the oppressive government of Panem [why].

Scientific Paper: The purpose of this paper is to study the disappearance of the wild bee population in key farming regions of the United States [what] and will discuss the increased need for pollination and the high cost farmers may incur as well as make suggestions for further research [why].

Ethics Paper: As the scientific community has achieved momentous advancements in biomedical research and technology, the need for scientific testing on non-human primates becomes less justifiable [what], and the United States Congress has a duty to phase out and ultimately prohibit experimentation on these animals [why].

For each of these examples, the papers themselves would be organized around discussing and proving the theses’ claims.

First, they would demonstrate that the what is a valid observation. This could involve paraphrases of research, quotations from experts, tables and graphs, or personal observations based on the text/data.

Then, the papers would walk readers through the reasons that the what logically leads to the why. This can involve additional research as well as personal analysis of the facts.

If every aspect of a paper accomplishes these two tasks, it is on its way to being appropriately structured and focused on your central claim.

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**Topic Sentences**
A topic sentence is the first sentence of each paragraph. They serve several important functions:

1. **They show the reader how each paragraph connects to the thesis.**
   
   **Example Thesis Statement:**
   Congress should amend the Constitution to make voting compulsory because it will encourage citizens to be more invested in politics and the democratic process, prevent taxation without fair representation, and reduce the power of special interest groups.

   **Topic Sentence:**
   In order to create a government that will represent the will of the people, a constitutional amendment to make voting mandatory will promote Americans’ stake in the political process.

   This topic sentence tells the reader how the paragraph relates to the thesis by referring to “encourag[ing] citizens to be more invested in politics.” Notice that even little details can be important, such as the use of “promote” and “stake” in the topic sentence refer to “encourage” and “invested” in the thesis. If the topic sentence does not seem to have any connection to what is stated in the thesis, you either need to edit your thesis or reconsider the direction of this specific paragraph.

2. **They introduce the reader to the content/topic of the paragraph.**
   
   **Topic Sentence:**
   One theory behind compulsory voting is to carry on the ideals of the Founding Fathers’ fight against taxation without representation, which led to the American Revolution and the birth of the United States.

   Thanks to the topic sentence, the reader now knows that you are going to continue explaining your argument for amending the Constitution to make voting compulsory by explaining the motivation for developing the American democratic system. This also gives you a blueprint for writing the paragraph because it focuses your thinking: anything other than the history of American discontent with Britain’s lack of parliamentary representation of the colonies or its relation to democracy and voting rights should be moved to another paragraph.

3. **They demonstrate how each paragraph fits into your argument’s structure.**

   Use the transition words to connect the ideas in your current and previous paragraphs.

   Transition | previous paragraph | Current paragraph
--- | --- | ---
In addition to fair representation in Congress, compulsory voting will put the power back in the hands of the people instead of industry lobbyists and the billionaire class.

An easy way to transition is to mention the topic of the previous paragraph and then explicitly state its relationship to the topic of the current paragraph. Since the last paragraph was about avoiding taxation without representation, you need to write out the connection between that topic and the topic of your current paragraph: the plan to the power back into the hands of the people.

If your audience can reconstruct your argument just by looking at the topic sentences, then congratulations! You have solid transitions.

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