

Characteristics of an effective thesis

An effective thesis sentence should be a central idea that requires supporting evidence; it should be of adequate scope for an essay of the assigned length; and it should be sharply focused.

When constructing a thesis sentence, you should ask yourself whether you can successfully develop it with the sources available to you and for the purpose you've identified. Also ask yourself if you can explain why readers should be interested in reading an essay that explores this thesis. If your thesis addresses a question or problem that intrigues you, then it will probably interest your readers as well. If your thesis would be obvious to everyone, then your readers will be less compelled to read on.

A thesis must require proof or further development through facts and details; it cannot itself be a fact or a description.

TOO FACTUAL The first polygraph was developed by Dr. John A. Larson in 1921.

REVISED Because the polygraph has not been proved reliable, even under the most controlled conditions, its use by private employers should be banned.

TOO FACTUAL John F. Kennedy's assassination on November 22, 1963, left many of his administration's projects unfinished.

REVISED Although John F. Kennedy sent the first American troops to Vietnam before he died, an analysis of his foreign policy suggests that he would not have escalated the war had he lived.

A thesis should be of sufficient scope for your assignment, not too broad and not too narrow. Unless you are writing a book or a very long research paper, the following thesis is too broad.

TOO BROAD Mapping the human genome has many implications for health and science.

TOO NARROW A person who carries a genetic mutation linked to a particular disease might or might not develop that disease.

REVISED Although scientists can now detect genetic predisposition to specific diseases, not everyone should be tested for these diseases.

A thesis should be sharply focused, not too vague. Avoid fuzzy, hard-to-define words such as *interesting*, *good*, or *disgusting*.

TOO VAGUE The way the TV show *ER* portrays doctors and nurses is interesting.

The word *interesting* is needlessly vague. To sharpen the focus of this thesis, the writer should be more specific.

REVISED In dramatizing the experiences of doctors and nurses as they treat patients, navigate medical bureaucracy, and negotiate bioethical dilemmas, the TV show *ER* portrays health care professionals as unfailingly caring and noble.

In the process of making a too-vague thesis more precise, you may find yourself outlining the major sections of your paper, as in the preceding example. This technique, known as *blueprinting*, helps readers know exactly what to expect as they read on. It also helps you, the writer, control the shape of your essay.

Tips for drafting a thesis sentence

- View your initial thesis as tentative. As you draft an essay, you may discover a main idea that is more interesting than the one you began with. As writer E. M. Forster put it, “How do I know what I think until I see what I say?”
- Instead of writing the thesis sentence by itself, try drafting the whole introduction, placing the thesis sentence in context (usually at the end of the introduction). This will help you see whether your thesis is clear.
- Don’t take on too much. If you try to begin with a grand, sweeping statement, you may not have the evidence to support it.