

Developing a Thesis Statement and Outline

THE THESIS STATEMENT: The thesis is the main idea of an academic paper and states your attitude or opinion on a certain topic.

Thesis = Subject + Opinion

A thesis is more than a title, an announcement of intent, or a statement of fact. It is the most important sentence in your paper, and every example and detail must connect to it and/or support it.

- Although a descriptive title like “The Prevention of Tuberculosis” orients the readers, it is not detailed enough to reveal the essay’s **purpose** or **direction**.
- An announcement of your intent like “This paper will discuss the effects of tuberculosis” can reveal more, but it is distracting because it is an overused and mechanical way to introduce a topic.
- Statements such as “A vaccination for tuberculosis is available” or “Tuberculosis is highly contagious” provide no direction because facts, unlike opinions, don’t require support. They are undisputable and can’t be argued against. Remember, a thesis is **YOUR** personal standpoint.
- A judgment or opinion in response to a fact—such as “The continuing threat of tuberculosis, particularly in the inner cities, makes it necessary to administer more frequent diagnostic tests among high-risk populations”—*can* be an effective thesis.

CRITERIA FOR A GOOD THESIS

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| 1. It is arguable, the kind of statement someone can agree or disagree with. |
| 2. It provides the answer to a specific question or the solution to a specific problem. |
| 3. It addresses the topic of the paper without straying from the central idea. |

To argue successfully, choose a thesis that meets the above criteria. Consider how each of these examples meets the criteria:

- As a fall project, the sociology club should install and monitor recycling bins on campus.
- Water pollution is responsible for high rates of breast cancer in our community; thus, the community needs to make greater efforts to end that pollution.
- Because of recent increases in food poisoning, the city should force restaurants to stop serving shellfish; “self-regulation” by the restaurants themselves has failed.

OUTLINE. An outline is an organizational guide of the written essay.

| AN OUTLINE... |
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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organizes ideas resulting from free writing, clustering, or any other brainstorming activity. |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identifies areas in which the paper needs additional work or supporting details to strengthen main ideas. |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pinpoints areas that have too much emphasis and need to be reduced/omitted to avoid imbalance. |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Helps identify how ideas are related and where connections or transitions are necessary. |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Helps determine how ideas fit the tentative thesis statement. |

TOPIC OUTLINE. Use words and phrases for all entries and no punctuation after entries; it is brief and easy to write.

Thesis: Watching movies at the theater is more entertaining than at home.

I. Viewing experience

- A. Big screen
- B. Sound system

II. Food

- A. Popcorn
- B. Candy

SENTENCE OUTLINE. Use complete sentences and correct punctuation for all entries; it is more detailed and informative.

I. Introduction

- A. Attention grabber: The average American child watches 8,000 murders on TV before completing elementary school.
- B. Thesis: Violence on television is a contributing factor to the increase in children’s violence.

II. Body

- A. Through observational learning, children can become aggressive.
 - 1. Children can learn to be aggressive by watching actors perform violent scenes.
 - 2. Violent cartoons can also influence children.

Sources: Hacker, Diana. A Writer's Reference. 5th ed. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2003.

Kriszner, Laurie G. and Stephen Mandell. Patterns for College Writing. 7th ed. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 1998.