

How to Build Effective Thesis Statements

ANATOMY OF A THESIS STATEMENT

All thesis statements have three major components: a topic, a claim, and scope.

TOPIC: The subject you will discuss

CLAIM: Your point of view on the subject

SCOPE: How limited your discussion of the topic will be

FUNCTIONS OF THESIS STATEMENTS

Although all thesis statements aim to give your reader an overall idea of what you are writing about, there are various ways those statements can function, depending on your purpose and what field you are writing in. Below are three general types of thesis statements that you'll commonly use. Notice how each has a **topic** (single underline) and a **claim** (double underline).

- ▶ **Argumentative:** To convince your reader about an issue by presenting compelling evidence to prove your point.
Substantial recovery of the ozone layer will only occur by enforcing stringent laws on corporations, not American citizens.
- ▶ **Explanatory:** To share information with a reader who may be unfamiliar with a topic or issue.
Instead of buying homes, Millennials are spending their income on travel and other temporary expenses.
- ▶ **Analytical:** To break down a subject or work to better understand its mechanics.
In *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, James Joyce uses motifs of religious piety and national pride to explore the fraught relationship Stephen Daedalus has with his father.

QUALIFIERS & SCOPE

In addition a topic and claim, your thesis statements should demonstrate how in-depth your discussion of the topic will be, which is called **scope**. We use **qualifiers**—or words that define specific conditions—in order to identify scope. Let's look at the same sentences from above to pinpoint their scope:

Substantial recovery of the ozone layer will only occur by enforcing stringent laws on corporations, not American citizens.

(Here, we've used a qualifier to show that there's a direct link between ozone layer recovery and enforcing laws on corporations. We expect that this paper will discuss these two topics, plus their connection.)

Instead of buying homes, Millennials are spending their income on travel and other temporary expenses.

(We've identified *how* Millennials are spending their income, while also bringing our attention to something they aren't purchasing. Your reader would expect you to discuss these spending habits.)

In *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, James Joyce uses motifs of religious piety and national pride to explore the fraught relationship Stephen Daedalus has with his father.

(Not only have we identified the book which we will discuss, we've also listed two types of motifs that will prove our claim.)

ORDER MATTERS

Your thesis statement provides your reader with a sense of what's to come. Thus, how you order the important components of your thesis statement will determine your reader's expectations of the essay structure. Below are some useful structures that can dictate how you will present your material.

If..., then...

If the US government enforces stringent laws on corporations not citizens, then substantial recovery of the ozone layer will occur.

List

Millennials do not invest in traditional markets like real estate due to rates of inflation, job availability, and treacherous loan rates.

Comparison

In *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, James Joyce likens motifs of religious piety and national pride to the fraught relationship Stephen Daedalus has with his father in order to show Daedalus's struggle for identity.

MORE TIPS FOR BUILDING GREAT THESIS STATEMENTS!

- **RESOURCE:** *They Say, I Say* by Gerald Graff and Cathy Birkenstein provides handy template sentences to help you organize your ideas into effective thesis statements.
- **REVERSE ENGINEERING:** You don't have to complete a thesis statement before you write your paper. In fact, sometimes writing your paper causes you to approach your topic different. Write down your topic, claim, and scope and return to them once your paper is solid. Figure a way to organize those elements to create a thesis statement that reflects the order of your paper.
- **GENRE AWARENESS:** Every discipline requires different things from their thesis statements. Study examples of thesis statements in your field by looking at similar assignments or types of writing, and pay attention to things like word choice and vocabulary.

Essay Organization

WHY DO WE BOTHER WITH ORGANIZATION?

Though this question might seem to have a straightforward answer, it's important to have a clear understanding as to *why* we organize our writing in order to better understand *how*. Essay organization works to:

- ▶ Make it easier for readers to understand your ideas
- ▶ Present or demonstrate the purpose of your writing
- ▶ Create or support the logic of your content
- ▶ Make your writing process smoother
- ▶ Meet the expectations of a professional piece of writing in your field

WHERE DO YOU START?

With a big paper ahead of you, it can be difficult to decide how to shape your ideas in a readable, organized fashion. You can order your paper in any number of ways, depending on what resources you have on hand. Try any of the approaches listed below to build a coherent piece of writing.

USE WHAT RESOURCES YOU HAVE TO DETERMINE STRUCTURE

If you have a(n)...	...then ask yourself:
Assignment sheet	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Does the instructor provide a structure by how they present the essay requirements? ▶ Is there a standard format for the genre you're writing in (e.g. business report, cover letter, lab report, purchasing manual)? ▶ How can you order the required elements in a logical fashion?
Evidence/resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ What information do your sources provide? ▶ Where does that information fit in to given genre? OR: Where does that information have the strongest impact on your reader?
Thesis statement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ According to your thesis statement, what do you have to explain/argue first in order to make your claim? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▷ Background information ▷ Cause ▷ How many elements do you mention in your thesis statement?

EXAMPLES OF OUTLINES

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