

**thesisstatements****Writing at the University of Alberta**

There are some common expectations about academic writing that can extend across disciplines.

<b>Writing that:</b>	<b>Writers are expected to:</b>
1. States explicit claims	1. Make a claim in a thesis statement
2. Develops an argument	2. Support their claims with facts, evidence, reasons, and testimonies from experts
3. Analyzes with insight	3. Examine in depth what they read and review
4. Investigates complexity	4. Explore the complexity of a subject and challenge readers by asking, “Have you thought about this?” or “What if you discard the usual way of thinking about a subject and take another point of view?”
5. Organizes with a hierarchical structure	5. Make the major parts or sections evident to readers and indicate which parts are subordinate to others
6. Signals with transitions	6. Indicate logical relationships clearly so readers can follow a pathway without getting lost
7. Documents sources carefully	7. Provide the sources of information so readers can consult the same sources the writer used in his or her document

Source: Faigley, Graves, & Graves (2011, p. 7). *The brief Penguin handbook*. Toronto: Pearson Canada.

**OPTIONAL**

Begin small group discussion with the handout of your choice.

- In their folders, the students were given a (colour) handout from the Centre for Writers “The Thesis Statement.” You can review key points of creating the thesis statement. Use the examples that are listed on this handout about academic and argumentative papers.
- You can use the (2-page) handout that Susan created: “How to Tell a Strong Thesis from a Weak One.” Her handout also includes the following exercises (and an answer key):
  - Part I: Choose the best revision for each thesis statement
  - Part II: Identifying problems in thesis statements
  - Part III: Practice revising thesis statements
- You can also begin discussion about thesis statements by using the students’ writing assignment on “Global Warming and Personal Responsibility.”

## How to Tell a Strong Thesis Statement from a Weak One

Writing Tutorial Services, Indiana University, Bloomington, IN  
[http://www.indiana.edu/~wts/pamphlets/thesis\\_statement.shtml](http://www.indiana.edu/~wts/pamphlets/thesis_statement.shtml)

### 1. A strong thesis statement takes some sort of stand.

Remember that your thesis needs to show your position about a subject. For example, if you are writing a paper for a class on fitness, you might be asked to choose a popular weight-loss product to evaluate. Here are two thesis statements:

<b>There are some negative and positive aspects to the Banana Herb Tea Supplement.</b>	This is a weak thesis statement. First, it fails to take a stand. Second, the phrase <i>negative and positive aspects</i> are abstract terms.
<b>Because Banana Herb Tea Supplement promotes rapid weight loss that results in the loss of muscle and lean body mass, and poses a potential danger to customers.</b>	This is a strong thesis because it makes your position clear. It is also specific and manageable.

### 2. A strong thesis statement justifies discussion.

Your thesis should indicate the point of the discussion. If your assignment is to write a paper on kinship systems, using your own family as an example, you might come up with either of these two thesis statements:

<b>My family is an extended family.</b>	This is a weak thesis because it merely states an observation. Your reader won't be able to tell the point of the statement, and will probably stop reading.
<b>While most American families would view consanguineal marriage as a threat to the nuclear family structure, many Iranian families, like my own, believe that these marriages help reinforce kinship ties in an extended family.</b>	This is a strong thesis because it shows how your experience contradicts a widely-accepted view. A good strategy for creating a strong thesis is to show that the topic is controversial. Readers will be interested in reading the rest of the essay to see how you support your point.

### 3. A strong thesis statement expresses one main idea.

Readers need to be able to see that your paper has one main point. If your thesis statement expresses more than one idea, then you might confuse your readers about the subject of your paper. For example:

<b>Companies need to exploit the marketing potential of the Internet, and Web pages can provide both advertising and customer support.</b>	This is a weak thesis statement because it is not clear whether the paper's subject is about marketing, the internet, advertising, or Web pages. To revise the thesis, the relationship between the ideas needs to become more clear. One way to revise the thesis would be to write:
<b>Because the Internet is filled with tremendous marketing potential, companies should exploit this potential by using Web pages that offer both advertising and customer support.</b>	This is a strong thesis because it shows that two ideas (i.e., the <i>Internet and Web pages</i> ) are related. Hint: clear and engaging thesis statements contain words like <i>because, since, so, although, unless, and however</i> .

**4. A strong thesis statement is specific.**

A thesis statement should show exactly what your paper will be about, and will help you keep your paper to a manageable topic. For example, if you're writing a seven-to-ten page paper on hunger, you might say:

<p><b>World hunger has many causes and effects.</b></p>	<p>This is a weak thesis statement for two major reasons. First, <i>world hunger</i> can't be discussed thoroughly in seven to ten pages. Second, <i>many causes and effects</i> is vague. You should be able to identify specific causes and effects. A revised thesis might look like this:</p>
<p><b>Hunger persists in Glandelinia because jobs are scarce and farming in the infertile soil is rarely profitable.</b></p>	<p>This is a strong thesis statement because it narrows the subject to a more specific and manageable parts to discuss in a paper (i.e., jobs and farming in Glandelinia). The statement also identifies the specific causes for the existence of hunger (i.e., scarcity of jobs and infertile soil).</p>

**ANSWER KEY Part I: Choose the best revision for each thesis statement**

**1) “The Raven” is a dark and morose poem that leaves the audience feeling depressed by the last stanza. Poe succeeds in creating that effect in “The Raven” through use of repetition and adds to it through contrast of religious Christian and Greek mythological references. [Original]**

- 1a) E.A. Poe uses repetition and contrasting religious symbolism to create the dark and morose feeling of “The Raven.” [Revision #1]
- 1b) Through the use of droning alliteration and assonance, Poe creates a dark and morose feeling in “The Raven”; Poe enhances this feeling by employing both Christian and Greek religious symbolism. [Revision #2]
- 1c) E.A. Poe’s “The Raven” conveys dark, morose, and depressing feelings because of the repetition of sounds and the contrasting Christian and Greek symbols of death and the afterlife. [Revision #3]

**Answer?** 1B is the correct revision to this thesis statement. This is because the revision includes both a claim and evidence clause, and uses more precise language to describe the claim than any other choice.

**2) Alexander Hamilton appeals to the logic of the Americans reading this text. [Original]**

- 2a) Alexander Hamilton appeals to the logic of his audience by relying on well-chosen diction and syntax. [Revision #1]
- 2b) By employing well-chosen diction and syntax, Alexander Hamilton appeals to his audience’s sense of logic. [Revision #2]
- 2c) In “The Federalist #1,” Alexander Hamilton appeals to his audience’s sense of logic through his use of powerful diction and clear syntax. [Revision #3]

**Answer?** The correct revision is 2C. It states the document to which it refers, while using the most precise language, such as **powerful** instead of **well chosen** and **clear syntax** instead of **well-chosen syntax**.

**3) While describing her feelings for her husband in this poem, Anne Bradstreet uses many symbols to get her point of the love for her husband across to the reader. [Original]**

- 3a) In “To My Dear and Loving Husband,” Anne Bradstreet uses several symbols, including “gold” and “rivers,” to convey her feelings of love. [Revision #1]
- 3b) Anne Bradstreet invokes her feelings of love in “To My Dear and Loving Husband” because of her effective use of symbols, including “gold” and “rivers.” [Revision #2]
- 3c) In the poem “To My Dear and Loving Husband,” Anne Bradstreet accomplishes her main goal of expressing her love for her husband by effectively using the symbols of “gold” and “rivers.” [Revision #3]

**Answer?** Revision 3c offers the most specificity with the notation of her main goal, and it sets up expectations of how the writer will explore the effective manner in which Bradstreet uses the two symbols.

## **ANSWER KEY Part II: Identifying Problems in Thesis Statements**

### **4) What is wrong with this thesis? How can you revise it to make it more effective?**

**"In this essay I will try to prove that drugs such as Prozac and Paxil are unnecessary and probably dangerous."**

**Answer?** Writing "in this essay I will prove x" does not express how or why you are making your argument, so it should be avoided whenever possible. A better form of this thesis would refer to the main reasoning behind the claim, allowing the reader to predict how the paper will unfold. For example, "Because of the inconclusive evidence for the usefulness of drugs such as Prozac or Paxil to treat depression, their widespread usage should be more carefully scrutinized" would be a more specific thesis which better outlines the paper's argument.

### **5) What is wrong with this thesis? How can you revise it to make it more effective?**

**"In his novel The Long Walk, it seems as if Stephen King is attempting to make a statement about the evils of laissez-faire capitalism, and in my opinion the characters and settings reflected this well."**

**Answer?** This thesis has two main problems: lack of specific evidence and too much hedging. The author should reference specific aspects of the book which suggest this interpretation in order to make a stronger and more acceptable claim. Additionally, the use of "it seems" and "in my opinion" weaken the claim by showing that the author may not believe his or her own words on this subject. A better thesis might be "Stephen King's The Long Walk exemplifies the evils of laissez-faire capitalism through its depiction of the main characters' competition amongst themselves, alienation from each other, and exploitation by commercial media."

### **6) What is wrong with this thesis? How could you revise it?**

**"The Great Gatsby is inarguably the best-written novel of the last 100 years, leaving millions of readers with either a renewed or disenchanted view of the "American Dream."**

**Answer?** While The Great Gatsby does thematically allude to the "American Dream," this is a "swashbuckling" thesis which makes too grand of a statement to be effectively supported in simply one essay, or even in one book. The author should specify under what context he or she is judging The Great Gatsby (American novels? 20th-century novels across the world? 20th-century Western novels?) and refer to the main reasoning behind this assertion (Is it the strength of the thematic elements? The descriptive prose? The witty dialogue?). In other words, the author has not established the HOW (context) and WHY (reasoning) of the thesis. A better version of this thesis might state "The Great Gatsby is widely regarded as one of the best 20th-century American novels due to its rich symbolism. Success, knowledge, corruption and alienation are but a few of the themes explored in Fitzgerald's novel. Together they form a meaningful commentary on living the American Dream."

### **7) What is wrong with this thesis? How would you revise it?**

**"The cost of a college education is rising sharply."**

**Answer?** This statement cannot act as a thesis because it does not answer a question or make a debatable claim. It cannot be disputed that college education is generally becoming more expensive. However, the statement can act as evidence to support a governing claim, but the governing claim should address a larger question which requires multiple pieces of evidence to support it. A more expansive thesis might state something like: "While a college education is intended to be a gateway to achieve success through hard work, the rising cost of college tuition along with more difficult loan-application processes have made attending college less viable for the middle class."

### **ANSWER KEY Part III: Practice Revising Thesis Statements**

**8) Revise this thesis to make the language more precise.**

**"The two films are different. One focuses on two women who are close friends and the other focuses on two male friends who are really just buddies."**

**Answer?** The two films differ greatly, because one focuses on close friendship between two women whereas the other focuses on a more casual friendship between two men.

**9) Revise this thesis statement to make the claim more specific:**

**"In The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, Robert Louis Stevenson symbolizes English upper and lower-class society."**

**Answer?** In The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, Robert Louis Stevenson symbolizes the disparity between upper and lower-class society through the opposing physical and psychological characteristics of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde.

**10) Should you always perfect your thesis before writing the rest of your paper?**

**Answer?** You should have a fair amount of research and perhaps some analytical writing completed before attempting to refine your thesis. Because the thesis also acts as a governing claim to your paper, mapping out the main points of your argument, you will want to have a thorough concept of what your entire argument will be before condensing it into a thesis statement. Additionally, trying to create a thesis simply from a question or preconceptions about a topic may tempt you to overlook any evidence which refutes that thesis while in the writing process. For step-by-step instructions on how to form a thesis after writing the body of your paper, suggest that students consult with a writing tutor. You may also encourage students to check the following online resources:

University of Alberta's Centre for Writers: <http://www.c4w.arts.ualberta.ca/Resources/Resource.aspx>

Purdue University's Online Writing Lab: <http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/545/1/>

<http://writing2.richmond.edu/writing/wweb/thesisexercise.html>

**Part I: Choose the best revision for each thesis statement**

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### 7) What is wrong with this thesis? How would you revise it?

"The cost of a college education is rising sharply."



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<http://writing2.richmond.edu/writing/wweb/thesisexercise.html>