
Learning Commons: Writing Centre/Essay Basics

Thesis Statements

The thesis statement is where you give readers the main idea of your piece of writing. If your main idea is straightforward, the thesis may be one sentence, usually presented at or near the end of the introduction; if your main idea is more complex, the thesis may be two or more sentences. When considering thesis statements, focusing on the content and clarity of your main idea is more important than focusing on the length or placement of the thesis.

A strong thesis will be specific and will state your central idea or argument, rather than simply letting readers know your topic. A strong thesis will leave readers without any doubt as to the purpose of the supporting information and ideas that they will be encountering in the body of the paper. A strong thesis will be original, rather than rehashing the main ideas of your sources, and a strong thesis will help to guide you, the writer, as you develop your ideas and support throughout the writing process.

Generally, a thesis is stated explicitly in the introduction or second paragraph of a piece of writing. As you experiment with different approaches to writing for different audiences, you might also find yourself working with an implied thesis. In this type of essay, the thesis is not explicitly stated, but rather implied by a very clear, well-developed text that has an inherent and cohesive sense of direction. For instance, you might write an essay which, for the most part, details your first trip to Marineland. If, through your clear, concrete, and vivid selection of detail and description, an impression emerges that the experience was traumatic for you and important in forming a personal stance against the captivity of wild animals, then you have implied a thesis. In this case, it isn't necessary for you to explicitly state that you don't believe in the continued use of zoos and aquariums. Following is a list of sample thesis statements for the topic below, along with comments assessing their effectiveness.

Topic: Should zoos, first established in the nineteenth century, be abolished? Provide a well-supported argument in defence of your thesis. Write your essay with a general audience in mind.

Ex. Zoos are cruel to animals and should therefore be abolished.

Comment: This thesis takes a position on the issue, but overall is quite vague. In what ways are zoos cruel to the animals? Why does this level of cruelty warrant the abolition of zoos?

Ex. Zoos are good in some ways, but not so good in others.

Comment: This thesis is vague in terms of both its position and direction. It takes a fence-sitting position in that it's unclear whether or not the writer favours the abolition of zoos.

Ex. Zoos provide an invaluable service and therefore should not be abolished.

Comment: Again, this thesis establishes a position on the topic, but it could be clearer in terms of direction. What is the "invaluable service" provided by zoos? Is this invaluable service unique to zoos, thereby supporting the view to keep them?

Ex. All zoos are cruel to animals; they house defenceless beasts in horrid conditions that breed disease and lead to premature death. Therefore, these inhumane establishments should be abolished.

Comment: While this thesis is emotionally powerful (in its use of language) and specific in terms of why zoos warrant abolition, it could be strengthened by moderating the initial generalization. Keep in mind that sweeping generalizations and extreme language may provoke emotional responses, but are more than likely to alienate readers and present an incomplete or biased picture of the topic. For example, are all zoos cruel? Have some zoos made progress in terms of treating and housing animals? Are all zoos inhumane? The writer here must be either able to support generalizations beyond a shadow of a doubt, or moderate the thesis to state the position clearly without relying on generalizations and extreme language.

Ex. Zoos are a necessary part of Western society and must be kept.

Comment: This takes a clear position in terms of keeping zoos, but it needs to be more specific in order to provide direction for the reader. In what ways are zoos a necessary part of society?

Ex. While some zoos have genuinely attempted to improve the living conditions and treatment of animals in captivity, most still offer squalid, cramped conditions not much improved over their nineteenth-century counterparts. With a proliferation of large, animal-friendly game farms and wildlife preserves, changes in social attitudes, and advances in technology, it no longer seems necessary to maintain the outdated establishment known as the 'zoo' in order to save the animals or learn from them.

Comment: This thesis takes a clear position for abolishing zoos and specifically maps out the direction the writer intends to take. While in this case the writer intends to discuss three major points, the scope of the paper could be easily modified to cover only one or two of the points. Notice that the writer begins with a concession. Also, note that by mapping out which major points are of interest, the writer imposes an inherent sense of organization on the text.

Ex. It is unacceptable for animals to be treated inhumanely in zoos. This is why changes have been, and are being, made all over the world. Advancements in habitat research have enabled modern zoos to create a healthy environment for animals. Of course, while the captive surroundings can never fully mimic life in the wild, we can do our best to see that the animals live comfortable, fruitful lives. Such compromises are necessary because zoos provide an invaluable service to society through the medical and wildlife research their existence facilitates.

Comment: This thesis takes a clear position in favour of keeping zoos. It also offers an effective concession and maps out the implicit direction for the paper that will follow.

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