

**DO YOU HAVE
SOMETHING
TO SAY?**

Narrowing and Refining Your Thesis Statement

Quick review

If an essay is "a short piece of nonfiction that tries to make a point in an interesting way..."

Then the thesis statement is "a statement of the point the essay makes."

What's a thesis statement?

A thesis statement is “a **single declarative sentence** that states what you want your readers to **know, believe, or understand** after having read your essay.”

Thanks to Professor John Tagg for this definition. See end of slide show for source information.

FINDING YOUR FOCUS



As you gather ideas, your first order of business is to narrow your topic into something manageable in scope and size.

Why is it important to narrow your focus?

Think of it this way: the more narrowed your focus, the more interesting (and “digestible”) it will be to your reader.



If your topic is too broad, it would be like trying to eat an entire pie...

...in one sitting.

FOR EXAMPLE

“College freshmen suffer from the blues and that’s why they’re dropping out of college.”

WHAT’S WRONG WITH THIS THESIS STATEMENT?

What do you mean by “the blues”?

“All” college freshmen? Really?

Too much to “digest” in a single essay.

Aren't there other possible reasons
college freshmen drop out?



Why not have a small slice of pie instead?



That's the
idea of a
narrowed
focus.

Instead of writing about college freshmen (too broad), write about a **specific aspect** related to college freshmen:

**Freshman Experience
Programs**

And instead of making a blanket generalization about your subject (“they suffer from the blues”), present a

**LIMITED BUT
CONTENT-RICH FOCUS**

that will interest and engage your readers.

BY
CONTENT-RICH
I mean one that passes
the
“SO WHAT?”
test.



Engage your
readers with
something new,
fresh, interesting,
challenging.

Make them **WANT**
to read your essay.



Something like this:

Freshman Experience Programs can help new freshmen adjust to the social and academic challenges of college life.

SPECIFIC TOPIC

Freshman Experience

Programs can help new freshmen adjust to the social and academic challenges of college life.

LIMITED POSITION

DO THE MATH: CRAFTING YOUR THESIS

Specific
topic

+

Limited
position

=

Interesting,
Content-
Rich,
Focused
thesis

Crafting Your Thesis



COMMON ERRORS

- ◆ **DON'T ANNOUNCE** “The purpose of this essay is” or, “In this essay, I’m going to argue....”)
- ◆ **DON'T BE TIMID** “I believe....” or, “I think...” Just state your position.
- ◆ **DON'T ALIENATE YOUR READER** “People who are against gay marriage are racists!” The objective is to reason with your reader, not offend him.
- ◆ **DON'T MERELY STATE A FACT** You can’t defend a fact. Facts are used to support your position; they aren’t your position.
- ◆ **DON'T TRY TO COVER TOO MUCH** It’s better to have a lot to say about a little (slice of pie) than little to say about a lot (the whole pie).
- ◆ **A QUESTION IS NOT A THESIS STATEMENT** Remember, a thesis is a declarative sentence that states what you want your reader to know, believe, or understand, about your topic.

PRACTICE

The following slides contain thesis statements that need work. Apply the principles you just learned and revise these into strong, focused, content-rich thesis statements.

REVISE



INTO



STATEMENT OF FACT

The question of whether we need a national law governing the minimum drinking age is controversial.

POSITION STATEMENT

The legal minimum age for purchasing alcohol should be 18 rather than 21 for (the following) reasons.

REVISE A STATEMENT THAT

INTO

GOES WITHOUT SAYING

Friendship is an important part of life.

A FOCUSED DISCUSSION

Cultivating relationships is an important part of remaining socially healthy among college freshmen.

REVISE A STATEMENT THAT'S

INTO ONE THAT'S

**OF INTEREST TO
MOSTLY TO WRITER**

The four children
in my family have
completely
different
personalities.

**PROBABLY OF INTEREST TO
MANY READERS**

Birth order can
influence children's
personalities in
startling ways.

REVISE A THESIS THAT'S

INTO ONE THAT'S

GENERALIZED

Living in an apartment for the first time can teach you many things about taking care of yourself.

FOCUSED, SPECIFIC

By living in an apartment, first year students can learn valuable lessons in financial planning and time management.

CAN YOU SUM UP?

A Good Thesis

- Is clear
- Asserts one main idea
- Passes the “so what”? test
- Has a limited focus
- Uses specific language
- Is recognizable (the reader “gets it”)

What to Avoid

- Biting off more than you can chew.
- Goes without saying; of interest only to the writer
- Broad, generalized focus
- Vague, non-specific
- Ambiguity; reader doesn’t “get” it.

PRACTICE

Apply the principles you just learned to **your own thesis statement**, creating (or revising) as needed to make it **strong, clear, focused, and interesting**.

Work with a partner or peer tutor, as needed.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Some information about thesis statements was excerpted from “The Discovering Ideas Handbook,” by John Tagg. You may access this source at <http://daphne.palomar.edu/handbook/handbook.htm#toc>

Created by Elaine Minamide
Palomar College
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