

# Swarthmore College Writing Center

## Developing a Thesis Statement

### ***What thesis statements do***

Almost all academic papers contain a thesis – an assertion you make about your topic that your paper is dedicated to defending. Before you start writing, you should do some prewriting to develop a working thesis. Remember, it doesn't need to be perfect before you start writing. You'll develop and refine your thesis as you write and revise.

A good paper is analytic and interpretive. It is analytic because it makes an argument (the thesis); it is interpretive because it bases its analysis on interpretation of texts, facts, or data. The focus of a paper should NOT be a repetition of facts or simple plot summary.

Consider these sample thesis statements:

1. Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz and Bartolomé de las Casas were radical critics of the colonial world.
2. Because Sor Juana advocated eliminating an existing social tradition, while las Casas advocated reforming the colonial system, Sor Juana can be viewed as a more radical social critic.

Statement 1 is simply an observation that many readers might make about these authors' writing. This is not a particularly good thesis for a paper because you don't have to convince your reader that it's true; you're merely stating a fact that few people would contest. On the other hand, statement 2 identifies some limitations of Sor Juana's and las Casas' social critiques, distinguishing them in a controversial way. It proposes an interpretation of the two authors based on the observation made in the first statement. Statement 2 is, therefore, a much more viable thesis.

### ***How to develop a thesis***

Developing an argument requires thoughtful reflection on evidence you gather. This will probably take some time! You don't have to come up with the best argument right away. It often takes an outline or a draft before you develop your thesis. Sometimes your professor will give you a well-defined prompt for your essay. This makes your job easier, but it doesn't mean you don't have to do any work.

For example, consider the following prompt:

“Did gender roles play a part in the French Revolution?”

Your answer should not simply say:

“Yes, they did, in the following ways...”

That thesis would be summary of facts, not analysis or interpretation. Consider the following example:

“Primary sources detailing the personal exchanges of women in late-18<sup>th</sup> century France reveal that women exerted considerable influence on political events, not just as the wives of important men, but also as independent agents of change.”

This is a successful thesis. Even when you’re answering a concrete question, the argument still needs to be based on your analysis and interpretation of the prompt.

If you’re stuck trying to come up with a point to argue, these general types of argument might help you frame your thesis:

- **What someone or some entity should or should not do.** This kind of argument is the answer to “We have a problem. What should we do? How can we solve this problem?” For example, an argument addressing the question “How should the government respond to the increase in homelessness in major cities?” could be “The government must increase funding for social programs to adequately reduce the number of homeless in major cities.” This argument describes an action that the author believes should be taken, and the essay will go on to explain why that action is the correct one.
- **An attempt to understand something better.** This kind of argument isn’t action-oriented; instead, you target a conceptual or academic problem. For example, you might try to answer “Were gender issues a significant cause of the French Revolution?” An answer to this question will be an argument, but it will be based on evaluation and exploration of scholarship, historical facts, and other relevant information you will collect. Many academic essays will fall into this category.

- **An interpretation of scientific data you have collected.** A thesis can be your conclusions based on scientific results. That's right! Lab reports have arguments too. Your argument is the conclusion or conclusions that your data and results support. For example, you might use spectroscopic evidence to support the claim "Nitrogen is the preferred donor atom in cobalt(III) pentammine complexes."