At the end of this workshop, you should be able to
• Explain the elements of a thesis statement
• Develop and test thesis statements for debatability, focus, and insight
• Apply those strategies to your own thesis statements

Elements of a Thesis Statement
What is a thesis statement?
Knowledge starts with curiosity, and curiosity starts with questions. When you look around and ask how or why something came to be, then you are taking the first step toward knowledge. When you eliminate obvious wrong answers from your how or why questions and narrow your focus to explore one or two potential explanations, then you are engaging in what the Greeks called “hypotithenai,” in which you “suppose” or otherwise construct a possible explanation for the how or why question you initially asked.

• You use the related term, “hypothesis” to describe a testable theory.
• You use the term “thesis” to describe an academic argument that you’re making.
• You use the term “thesis statement” to describe a one or two-sentence answer to a question that you’ve explored in an essay.

Hypotheses, theses, or thesis statements cannot be proven to be “true.” (In that case, you’d call them “facts.”) However, they can be supported, and they can also be disproved.

A successful essay is an investigation, with you as the investigator and your thesis statement as your conclusion about the results of that investigation. Sometimes the biggest challenge in an investigation is figuring out what question or questions to ask. This, as well, is true of a thesis statement, which eventually addresses one or more solid investigative question about the topic: Who? What? When? Where? How? Why? Under what conditions?

Unlike some investigative questions, thesis statements answer only with conclusions, not with facts, so thesis statements can be disproved or supported, but cannot be statements of facts.

Why can thesis statements be so difficult to construct?
If you’re trying to write your conclusion before you’ve actually determined the best question, much less the best answer, your thesis statement won’t work. That’s why rough drafts are so important to a writer, because they give you a chance to investigate your tentative answer before using it as a thesis statement. Other related problems include

• Trying to give an answer to a question that you haven’t figured out how to ask yet.
• Squeezing a too general question into the limits of the assignment
• Stretching a too narrow question within the limits of the assignment
• Lacking any sense of an answer to your question

Evaluating someone else’s thesis statement
How do you know a useful thesis statement when you see one?

1. A thesis is NOT a statement of fact. A successful thesis statement is one with which a reasonable person can disagree and even construct a counterargument to the thesis statement. That is, the statement is debatable.
2. The successful thesis statement reflects the scope and conditions of the assignment. A good thesis statement will give the reader a preview of what the rest of the paper will
A successful thesis statement is focused.

Try rating a thesis statement you have written on this “Usefulness Scale” (If you cross the line, you need more work; if you’re near the line, consider some modifications):

Debatable | Too factual
Focused | Too big
Insightful | Too boring

Evaluating your own thesis statement

How do you know if your particular thesis statement is useful?

1. Locate it in the paper (If you can’t find it, it’s definitely not useful).
2. Test it on the “usefulness scale.”
3. Answer the following questions. If, based on the thesis statement alone, you can answer the first three, in the order in which you ask them, you’ve got a winner (unless the answer to the final question is “no”). If you come to a question that you cannot answer, revise at that point.
   a. What, if any, investigative question is addressed?
   b. What will be investigated?
   c. How will it be investigated?
   d. Can the conclusion (answer to the question) be addressed within the conditions of the essay?

How can you make a less-than-useful (weak) thesis statement stronger?

Sometimes you have to discard it, particularly if you find that your investigation either meets a dead end or doesn’t really address the question you want to ask, but sometimes you work with usable material inside the statement. Even if you can’t find the implied conclusion to an investigative topic, you might be able to locate a topic, or a point of view, or better, both. Using your current version, try the following:

1. Circle key words or phrases that could be useful as subjects or points of view. Ignore general words like “many,” “very,” “interesting,” and phrases like “This story is about . . .” or “The author says . . .” or “Critics believe that . . .”.
2. Ask an investigative question about the key word/phrase(s) you’ve isolated. Better yet, ask several investigative questions.
3. State your tentative answer to the question.
4. If general phrases like “many factors,” or “variety of issues,” have snuck into your answer, try substituting small numbers.
5. Repeat the process until you can see a forecast of the structure and depth of your paper.
6. Check for debatability, focus, and insight.

More questions? Contact the Avery Point Academic Center at 860-405-9058 or email us at apac@uconn.edu.