

## Thesis Statements

A thesis statement is the main idea of an essay, expressed in one sentence. It is an opinion, not just a fact. It is about a limited topic, that is, not so vague or broad that it is impossible to write about persuasively. It is not a question, although it may be the *answer* to a question. It does not include unnecessary phrases like “in my opinion,” or “I think” (we know--this is what you think). It uses simple, clear language and avoids figurative language such as similes or metaphors. Perhaps most important, it is about a *discussable* topic.

### Example thesis statements

Poor...	...Because	Better
The unfairness of alcohol laws.	Not a complete sentence	Current California alcohol laws are unfair.
How young is too young to drink alcohol?	A question cannot be a thesis. The <i>answer</i> to the question is the thesis.	Drinking age in California should be lowered to reflect the adult status of 18-year-olds.
Various countries all over the world have different rules about drinking age.	Too broad to write about effectively	Cognitive development theory suggests that drinking age in California should be raised to 25.
This essay will prove that a person who is old enough to vote and serve in the armed forces should be allowed to drink alcohol too.	Uses unnecessary language	A person who is old enough to vote and serve in the armed forces should be allowed to drink alcohol too.
Alcohol is a big problem for families in this country.	Too vague	The effects on school-aged children of having an alcoholic parent can be devastating.
Thirty-six percent of California’s traffic fatalities in 2005 were alcohol related.	Factual, not discussable	The use of the term “alcohol related” for traffic fatalities is misleading and results in higher apparent numbers of drunk-driving deaths.
The effects of drunk driving are tragic.	No reasonable opposite opinion, not discussable	Not all the effects of drunk driving are tragic.
The runaway train of individualism must be controlled and not allowed to jump the track and obliterate innocent bystanders of the community.	Uses figurative language	An individual’s right to drink alcohol to excess must be balanced with the rights of the rest of the community to pursue a peaceful life, unthreatened by the excesses of others.
The inconsistent penalties for drunk driving, even if enhanced, because of the impact of drinking and driving on families who lose their children, fathers, mothers, or other family members to death and/or disability, are not strict enough in the various states, allowing drunk drivers to go back to driving although there is high risk of doing it again.	Unclear, unfocused	We need a consistent, national law that strips drunk drivers of their driving privileges for five years on the very first offense.

## Discussable

*Discussable* means there must be another possible reasonable opinion about the topic. For example, “Dogs are mammals” is not a good thesis statement. There is really nothing to discuss. Similarly, “War is bad” is not a good thesis statement because there is no reasonable opposite opinion. For similar reasons, a thesis such as “A good friend is always there for you” is not strong because most reasonable people would agree.

## Topic + controlling idea

A thesis statement does two things: it states your topic—usually a couple words or a short phrase—and it states what you have to say about that topic. What you have to say controls the direction of your writing—what you include and what you omit. It is the controlling idea of your essay. Because a thesis controls what can and cannot go into your essay, it helps you select what information to include and keeps you from going off-topic.

Besides controlling what can and can't go into the essay, the thesis statement serves as a road map to your essay. Everything you intend to write about is found in the thesis statement, in the same order in which you will write about it. It's your entire essay in a nutshell.

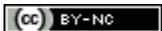
## The working thesis

You need to have a rough thesis in mind before you begin to write a draft. In other words, you must know what you want to say *before* you try to say it.

If you do not have a rough, or working, thesis in mind before you begin to write, you are not drafting an essay at all. You are free writing. Free writing is a good way to generate ideas that you can later use in an essay, but many writers mistake their free writes for their first drafts. The difference between a free write and the first draft is the discipline imposed by a thesis. Without it, your writing is almost guaranteed to wander.

As you write, you might find that your working thesis doesn't accurately state what you have come to think about the topic. In this case, revise the thesis to reflect your thinking. If you change your mind, if your research forces you in a different direction, change your thesis. As you write, keep going back to your thesis to ensure that your thesis, your thought, and your essay development match. However, take care not to re-work your thesis too many times; you're probably writing on deadline and can't afford to keep starting over. In the end, you might find that your final thesis is quite a bit different from your original, working thesis, and that's okay—it's probably because you learned something.

*Contributed by Rosemary McKeever*



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