

The Thesis Statement

from Unit 8, *Paragraph Practice*, Fourth Edition, by Kathleen Sullivan

1. What is a thesis sentence?

A thesis sentence states the purpose of the composition. It conveys the central or main idea of the composition and often indicates how the main idea will be supported. Ideally, it is a one-sentence summary of the whole composition.

2. What is the difference between a thesis sentence and a topic sentence?

A thesis sentence governs the content and structure of a whole composition, whereas a topic sentence guides only one of its parts or paragraphs. Both sentences are signals of what is to come. The thesis sentence plans the trip, as it were; the topic sentence shows one of the places that must be passed through to get to the destination.

3. Where should the thesis sentence be placed within the composition?

The best place for the thesis sentence is in the beginning of the composition. It should be written in the first paragraph. It may be the first and only sentence of the first paragraph, or it may follow an introductory sentence or two and then come as the climax of the first paragraph.

4. Are all thesis sentences alike in content and form?

Thesis sentences vary in a multitude of ways with respect to content (who knows how many subjects there are to write about?); they also vary in their form.

In your college courses, you will frequently be called on to formulate thesis sentences in response to assigned reading. You will read, and then you will be asked to react in writing. To some degree, therefore, both the content and the form of your thesis sentence, which is your reaction in a nutshell, will be determined by your reading and by the nature of your particular assignment. In all cases, however; *a thesis sentence is a statement of position, of belief or of a point of view*, either your own or that of someone else, such as the author of your assigned reading.

The form of the thesis sentence is important not only in making a clear statement but in making it in such a way that it governs or controls the organization of the whole composition. A good thesis sentence tells not only where the composition is going but how it is going to get there. Much like a good outline, the thesis sentence gives the plan for the composition.

One suggestion may aid you in making the thesis sentence not only a clear statement but a good plan. *Divide the thesis sentence into two or three parts.*

When you divide your thesis sentence into two or three parts, you give your reader, as well as yourself, a more precise preview of the composition as a whole than you can with an undivided thesis sentence. Compare the sentences below. The first of each pair is an undivided thesis. The thought is expressed in one vague lump that gives no indication of the way in which the composition will proceed or how it will be organized. The second sentence of each pair is divided into two or three parts that suggest the organization of the composition.

1. People who live in the suburbs are alike. (undivided)
People who live in the suburbs are alike in *age, race, and politics*. (divided into three parts)
2. Capital punishment should be abolished. (undivided)
Capital punishment should be abolished because it is *useless and inhumane*. (divided into two parts)
3. The essay is a satire. (undivided)
The essay satirizes *younger* as well as *older* people. (divided into two parts)
4. Pollution constitutes a serious problem to humanity. (undivided)
Air and water pollution constitute a serious problem to humanity. (divided into two parts)
5. Life on this earth may soon be wiped out. (undivided)
Plants, animals, and people (the so-called higher animals) may soon be wiped out. (divided into three parts)

The second sentence of each pair above is a brief summary that tells not only where the composition is going but how it is going to get there. Consider the first example: *People who live in the suburbs are alike in age, race, and politics*. One can tell at a glance not only the subject of the composition, *but also how the composition will be organized*. The subject, the similarity of suburbanites (that you may disagree is perfectly all right; the point is that you know the subject), is divided into three parts: age, race, and politics. One knows what to expect in the composition, Your reader knows and you know (should this be your subject). *The division is as useful to you as it is to your reader*. Suppose you lost track of your subject and the way in which you wanted to present it. Look back. There it is, all spelled out in the thesis.

Keep in mind that *the composition must discuss each part of the thesis in the order in which it appears in the thesis*. The discussion part of the composition about the similarity of suburbanites must begin with *age*, proceed then to *race*, and then turn to *politics*. Of course, the order might be rearranged in the thesis sentence

and, therefore, rearranged in the discussion, but whatever the order of the thesis, so must be the order of the discussion.

The division of the thesis sentence into parts is sometimes simply for the purpose of breaking the thought down into areas or aspects that make the discussion more orderly and manageable. More often, the division is for the purpose of *supporting the thought*. The position, belief, or point of view you present in your thesis sentence is more meaningful or convincing when it is supported. Proof is needed, in other words, *Why do you think such and such? What is your evidence? What are your reasons?* When you summarize or outline your major points of proof by stating them in your thesis sentence, you straighten out your own thinking and you permit your reader to see in advance of your discussion not only what it is that you want to prove but also how you plan to prove it.

Compare the following pairs of sentences. The first of each pair makes an unsupported claim. That is, no proof, evidence, or reasoning is offered to support the position, belief, or point of view presented. The second sentence of each pair offers support. (Note the tools, in **bold**, which are synonyms of 'because' and signal presentation of reasons.)

1. It may rain today. (unsupported)
It may rain today because there are dark clouds in the sky and my barometer is falling. (supported)
2. Mr. X thinks he has a cold or the flu. (unsupported)
Mr. X thinks he has a cold or the flu because he has a sore throat, a headache, and a fever. (supported)
3. Ireland is a tourist's delight. (unsupported)
Ireland is a tourist's delight **for three reasons**: the country is beautiful, the people are friendly, and the prices are reasonable. (supported)
4. Rachel Carson's thesis in *The Silent Spring* is that the indiscriminate use of chemical insecticides should be abolished. (unsupported)
Rachel Carson's thesis in *The Silent Spring* is that the indiscriminate use of chemical insecticides should be abolished, **as** it is unnecessarily poisoning wildlife and as there are better controls, such as the use of natural predators. (supported)
5. Real estate, though it promises work and worry, is a good investment. (unsupported)
Real estate, though it promises work and worry, is a good investment **in that** it is substantial and relatively secure, it generally appreciates, and it offers tax advantages. (supported)

The second sentence of each pair above, because it gives proof or reasons, is the more meaningful or convincing of the two. As a thesis sentence, it would also be a better guide than the first. It would suggest both the content and the order of the whole composition,

5. Do compositions always contain a thesis sentence?

Compositions that are expository—that is, that explain or discuss ideas and facts—require a thesis sentence. Argumentative compositions demand a thesis sentence also. These are the types of compositions you are most often asked to write in college courses; therefore, it is important that you master and learn to think in terms of the thesis sentence. For you, the thesis sentence is a matter of almost always. You should be aware that there are other types of compositions, however, such as narrative and descriptive compositions, and that these types may or may not require a thesis sentence. If you learn to write so well that you decide to take a course in creative writing, for example, you should then be in a position to decide whether your composition needs a thesis sentence. Meanwhile, assume that it does.

6. Is the thesis always a single sentence?

In some cases, it may be simpler or clearer to break the thesis down into more than a single sentence, especially if the main idea of the composition is unusually complex or if the composition is long. In most cases, you should be able to state the purpose or main idea in a single sentence.

7. Is the division of the thesis sentence always limited to two or three parts or supports?

In a short composition of about four to eight paragraphs, it is a good plan to limit the parts or supports of the main idea to two or three. Additional parts or supports would likely result in insufficient development of each part within the relative brevity of the composition as a whole. In a longer composition, however, the parts or supports might well exceed two or three in number.

Summary

Begin your composition with a thesis sentence that is precise in conveying the purpose or central idea of the composition. It is best to divide your thesis sentence into two or three parts to make clear not only what your composition is to be about, but exactly how it is to be organized or developed. You thus give a preview or overview of the entire composition.