

THESIS WORKSHOP HANDOUT

What is a Thesis Statement?

Almost all of us—even if we don't do it consciously—look early in an essay for a condensation of the argument or analysis that is to follow. We refer to that summarization as a thesis statement.

Myth v. Fact about thesis statements:

Myth: Thesis statements have to be one sentence in length, no more.

⇒ **Fact: Thesis statements can be more than one sentence.** In fact, some of the best thesis statements are multi-sentence statements.

Myth: Thesis statements have to be the first or the last sentence of the very first paragraph of your paper.

⇒ **Fact: Thesis statements should come towards the beginning of your paper, but its placement is up to you.** It is usually recommended that people open with a “hook” and introductory notes that organically move into the thesis statement.

Myth: A thesis statement has to say “The thesis of this paper is...”

⇒ **Fact: Your thesis statement needs to be obvious but there are more creative ways to write your thesis statement** than to blatantly say “the thesis of this paper is...”

Myth: You have to write your thesis statement before you start researching or writing.

⇒ **Fact: Although you need to have a general idea of where you want your argument to go, you should NOT write a final thesis statement before you begin writing. Instead, you would write a TENTATIVE thesis statement and adjust it as your research and write.** You should use your list of research questions to guide your research and help create a more specific and solid thesis statement. **Keep in mind that as you write your paper it will be necessary to adjust your thesis depending on the paper's organization and flow.**

Evaluating Thesis Statements:

There are several different types of thesis statements. Two of the most common are **analytic** and **descriptive** theses:

- An **analytic** thesis presents an argument about a particular historical subject that is formed by research of evidence. As the name suggests, the paper involves the analysis of a particular historical subject.
- A descriptive thesis usually reiterates given fact(s) about a particular historical person, event, or idea. In many ways, a descriptive thesis is simply a summary or a report; it lacks analysis.

For this paper you need to present an analytic thesis.

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Are the following analytic or descriptive theses? Circle D for descriptive or A for analytic.

1. The Ming Dynasty utilized eunuchs as high officials in government. D/A
2. Although Joan of Arc was found guilty of heresy, her execution was not justified. D/A
3. During the age of European exploration, new sails and ships were created. D/A
4. The French had a rather accommodating policy of evangelization in which missionaries would live with the natives, like the Hurons, in order to learn the language and infiltrate society in order to gain the native's trust. D/A
5. One of the most contentious debates in history is whether or not Christopher Columbus was the "true" discoverer of North America. Examining Norse sagas and using archaeological evidence from the archaeological site, L'Anse aux Meadows, it is clear that Christopher Columbus was not the first person from Europe to set foot in North America. Instead, the evidence points to Leif Ericson as the "true" discoverer of North America. D/A
6. Longbows, because of their accuracy and range, were superior weapons for the English to use, especially against their adversaries, like the French, that used crossbows. D/A

A strong analytic thesis should do the following: clearly present an argument, define a time period, and explain the historical context and significance of the argument.

Example: Richard I of England is commonly referred to as Richard the Lionheart due to his supposed bravery during his crusade against the Arab leader Saladin. However, when examining crusade chronicles during Richard's reign, it becomes clear that Richard was much more of a sheep than a lion when it came to his official policies and actions during battle. The moniker "Lionheart" was, in fact, a propaganda tool intended to raise support at home for Richard's continued involvement in the crusades.

How to Tell a Strong Thesis Statement from a Weak One

Are the following theses strong or weak? Why?

1. Henry the Navigator established the idea that the mother country should regulate the economy of the colony for its own benefit, the fundamental principal of mercantilism.
2. The English victory at the battle of Agincourt can be attributed to the superiority of their weaponry: the longbow. In comparison to the French crossbows used at Agincourt, the English longbows were faster, more accurate, and held a longer range, allowing the English to attack from afar and reduce its numbers of injured and dead.
3. European empires used Christianity in order to justify their conquest of the New World.
4. The Knights Templar were some of the most active members of the medieval crusades, leading to great wealth, success, and a growing membership. But by the start of the fourteenth century, members of the Knights Templar began to threaten the power of both the French king and, more importantly, the Pope. Worried that the Knights might rise up in rebellion of both powers, with the assistance of the French king, the Pope ordered the arrest and disbandment of the Knights Templar on Friday, October 13, 1307. Examining the papal bulls, correspondence between the Pope and the French king, as well as documents written by the Knights Templar that suggested they were planning a coup d'état, the concerns and subsequent actions of the French monarchy and Pope were well justified as the Templars presented a serious political threat.

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5. The Ming Dynasty, having learned from prior Chinese dynasties, utilized eunuchs in high government positions in order to avoid the establishment of a hereditary dynasty.
6. In honor of Amerigo Vespucci, who wrote one of the best-selling books in sixteenth-century Europe, *Introduction to Cosmography*, Europeans began to call the New World “America.”
7. When compared to the seventeenth-century descriptions in the *Jesuit Relations*, the representation of French evangelization practices in Canada in the movie *Dances with Wolves* is relatively accurate.

Identifying thesis statements in paragraphs

In the following paragraphs, underline the thesis statement. Once you have underlined them evaluate: 1) Whether this is an analytic or a descriptive thesis. 2) Is it a strong thesis? 3) Does it clearly convey an argument?

Throughout the late fifth and early sixth-centuries Europe moved more towards the feudalistic and manorialistic systems with which we now associate with the style of governing that took pace during the medieval period. This evolution meant that the populous of Europe would become increasingly dependent on the rulers that governed them. From that time on, a larger than life character has been associated with this period, King Arthur. There is no doubt that most written about King Arthur is the work of fiction, but that in no way reduces the legend’s impact on the people of the medieval period. Why were the myths and legends about this figure so appealing? Could they be purely fiction? Or perhaps, could it be that people of the time were looking for a strong, compassionate leader that they could trust?

In 1492, Columbus sailed the Ocean Blue...or so goes the rhyme well-known to every American schoolchild. In the United States, Christopher Columbus is routinely celebrated as the discoverer of North America. Columbus Day is devoted to his accomplishments and Thanksgiving festivities often involve the telling of his infamous voyage with the Nina, the Pinta, and the Santa Maria. But, does Columbus really deserve this praise? Although his accomplishment of traversing an unknown sea is impressive and worthy of some praise, his label as the “first discoverer” of North America is a fallacy. By examining modern archaeological evidence from the site at L’anse-aux-Meadows and the Norse Sagas, it becomes clear that the true first discoverer of North America was actually a tenth-century Viking, Leif Ericson who established a colony called Vinland on the tip of modern-day Newfoundland.

Therefore, the question remains as to what factors effectively led to the Roman Army becoming the most elite in the known world. After some historical review through both secondary sources and primary documents, it is reasonable to believe that though the reforms of Servius Tullius and Gaius Marius, key institutions and social systems were established and then slowly developed and refined by future Roman leaders such as Augustus. These reforms then, in the broader historical context, became significant factors that contributed to the evolution of the Roman Army from a relatively small and primitive entity to a dominant and disciplined force that would come to conquer the known world. In order to understand how the Roman Army evolved, it is important to briefly begin with a contextualized background as a starting point to look back upon.

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However, by the 1200s, a combination of Christian and artistic influences gave rise to an institution that would come to redefine the word knight: chivalry. The 11th century saw the beginning of the Church's attempts to control the belligerent tendencies of the knights, and the Christian symbols used in the ceremonies of knighting and the importance of chivalric conduct testified to its influence. Honor, loyalty, and bravery became principles associated with knights as they took on the code of conduct set forth by chivalry. However, chivalry and feudalism would not remain stagnant and, as with all things, changed with time. From 1200 to 1400, the increases in medieval warfare technology, changes in the nature of feudalism, and chivalry made the institution of knighthood an ever-evolving creature beholden to time.

Gladiators have captivated the imagination of scholars and non-scholars alike for centuries. The fact that men were forced to fight-sometimes until the death- against one another or wild animals for the entertainment of the masses defies moral standards of civility but in Rome, this was a common practice and considered the quintessential form of entertainment. Many wonder exactly how these games would have looked like in Rome's Colosseum. Although there were some engravings of gladiatorial games throughout Rome and archaeological evidence, there were not photographs or movies in the medieval period for us to gain a real image of these games. Therefore, when directors wish to produce movies about these games and ancient Rome, it is up to the imagination of the director to reproduce these games, which can result in gross over exaggerations and inaccuracies or a masterful description of these games, the gladiators, and the weapons used in them. The 2000 film, *Gladiator*, falls in the latter category and provides a fairly accurate depiction of gladiatorial weapons, such as the gladius, the shield, the mace, and the leather whip, as well as gladiators, and the social importance of the gladiatorial games in Rome.

Thesis Tips:

- Use your research questions well. While researching, constantly come back to them and think about what you have found so far helps answers those questions.
- Don't get stuck at the thesis when writing. You should have a general sense of what your argument is when you start writing. Put that in CAPS at the start of your paper to remind you and adjust as you go along.
- Don't start writing your paper with the introduction. Instead, **start with your body paragraphs and then end with your introduction and conclusion.** This way, you will be sure that your thesis statement matches up with the argument you actually end up making in the body paragraphs.
- **Make sure that what you have written matches up with your thesis statement. Adjust as necessary.**
- Don't try to limit your thesis statement to one sentence.