THESIS STATEMENTS

WHAT IS A THESIS STATEMENT?

A thesis statement is simply a sentence that expresses an essay's main idea.

WHY DO YOU NEED A THESIS STATEMENT?

Two reasons:

1) The thesis tells the reader what to expect from the essay in way of argument and organization. It acts as a guide to help the reader understand the development of ideas and examples in the essay.

2) The thesis helps the writer to focus and clarify what she/he really wants to say. It also helps the writer to keep track of how he/she is developing her/his ideas and arguments.

HOW DO YOU GET A THESIS STATEMENT?

Very few writers start the writing process with a thesis statement in mind. While writers may begin with a general idea, they often don't arrive at their thesis until they've worked through their thoughts, arguments, and examples. In short, the thesis is the product of revision and rewriting -- it is something arrived at after a period of serious writing.

In other words, during the revision process (after you have drafted some written material), you want to reduce your essay to one sentence expressing the overall point you are trying to make. Sometimes this sentence is buried deep in your draft, and other times you may have to draft a new statement that sums up your paper.

WHERE DO YOU PLACE A THESIS STATEMENT?

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Although the thesis statement sometimes appears in the title, the middle of the paper, or even at the end, most writers place their thesis statement in the first paragraph of the final draft of their essay. Writers want their readers to see where they are going with their ideas. And readers, like travelers, want to have some advance information about their destination and how they are getting there.

**HOW DO YOU JUDGE A THESIS STATEMENT?**

Here are some criteria to use to judge the effectiveness of a thesis statement.

1) Does the thesis statement use specific language? Vague language in a thesis statement usually indicates vague or unclear ideas. Words like *interesting, unique, and fantastic* don't usually tell the reader much about the writer's ideas. (They usually indicate that the writer is still looking for a thesis statement.)

*For example:*

Oedipus Rex is an interesting play.

Well, yes, but this is not really an argument. The real issue is what makes Oedipus Rex an interesting play? Often, the answer is in the draft and needs to be stated at the beginning.

2) Is the thesis statement unified? In other words, how many ideas are really in the thesis statement? Thesis statements with more than one main idea tend to produce the "listing" essay -- an essay that just lists things about a play or poem or novel but doesn't develop an argument.

*For example:*

Oedipus' pride, Jocasta's vanity, and Creon's stupidity are all important in Oedipus Rex.

True enough, but this leads to a paper with three paragraphs describing character traits. The point is to determine how these ideas are related. Or to focus on how and why one of these traits is important to the play.

3) Is the thesis limited in scope? In other words, can this idea or argument really be covered in the space available?

*For example:*

Oedipus Rex stands at the center of the Western dramatic tradition.

Perhaps, but can you really prove this in four or five pages? Even if you could, would your discussion be too general? Would you really be looking closely at or generalizing wildly about the West, drama, and tradition

(over)
NOTE: Try to think of your thesis statement as a tool for revising rather than as a goal to be reached. Remember, a thesis statement is often the result of writing and often does not appear until a second or third draft. Then, your thesis statement can help you as you revise your paper and clarify your ideas.