



Division of
Academic Enhancement
UNIVERSITY OF GEORGIA



PLaTO
Peer Learning *and* Teaching Others

A Brief Guide to Writing a Better Paper



A Brief Guide to Writing a Better Paper

Thesis Statements: A good thesis statement is essential for any paper. Even though this element is vital for outlining your argument and organizing your paper, do not let the thesis statement overwhelm you. Here are a few tips for making your thesis statement the best it can be.

Thesis statements should have a *how* and a *what*.

The **how** is the thing your paper analyzes and the **what** is whatever that thing accomplishes. For instance, in a literature paper, the **how** could be a particular literary device such as metaphor and the **what** is the effect the metaphor achieves. Here is an example to better illustrate this:

In Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* the whale captures the indifference of nature towards man.

In this example the whale, a character, is the "how," and the indifference of nature towards man is the "what." What point does the text make? That nature is indifferent to man. How does it make this point? Through the character of the whale

You can and often will have more than one "how." For instance I could expand the above example to say:

In Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*, the actions of the whale, Moby Dick, combined with Ahab's deranged obsessive behavior illustrate nature's supreme indifference to the fate of man.

My "what" is the same here: nature's indifference to man but the "how" now has two elements: the whale and Ahab. Having multiple "hows" can give you more talking points, however it is important to consider the length of your paper and how much you can reasonably cover.

You should only have one "what." The "what" is the point your paper is trying to make. If you have more than one, your paper can easily lose focus and feel disorganized.

In conclusion, the thesis statement should have both a **how** and a **what**. The "what" is the argument you are making about the text, the hows are the elements in the text which prove or achieve your point.

Everything in your paper must relate to your thesis statement.

Your thesis statement must contain the argument of your entire paper. Whenever you start a new paragraph, it is a good idea to reread your thesis statement and ask if the paragraph you are writing works to prove that thesis statement. When we



write about things that are not in the thesis statement, our paper feels as if it is indulging in tangents. It becomes disorganized and harder to understand.

For example if we return to our thesis from earlier:

In Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* the actions of the whale, Moby Dick, combined with Ahab's deranged obsessive behavior illustrate nature's supreme indifference to the fate of man.

If I spend a paragraph talking about Ishmael in a paper with this thesis statement, then I have gone off topic. Staying directly with your thesis statement helps give your paper a clear focus.

Do not let this rule feel confining. If you find that you are constantly straying from your thesis then *do not rewrite your entire paper*. Just change your thesis. It is perfectly okay to write your entire paper and then change your thesis statement. The important thing is that the content of your paper and the argument outlined in the thesis match.

Try to keep your thesis statement to one sentence.

Sometimes we have a habit of biting off more than we can chew when writing. Just like everything in your paper must be in your thesis, everything in your thesis must be in your paper. That is to say that if you mention it in the thesis, you have to talk about it in the paper.

If your thesis is too long you will have a very hard time covering all the points in the paper. For most college papers, one way to limit your thesis is to keep it to one sentence.

Again, if you find your paper cannot cover everything in your thesis then simply change the thesis. The one sentence rule also makes your thesis easy for the reader to identify and refer to which helps keep your paper organized.

Your thesis statement must be original and debatable.

The original part of this requirement means do not plagiarize. *Do not* copy someone else's argument ever.

The debatable part can be a bit trickier, but basically it means to avoid plot summary.

Your argument should be something with which people can potentially disagree. For example:

Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* shows that whales can be dangerous to people.



This thesis is correct, but it does not make an argument about the text. Almost no one who has read *Moby Dick* would think to debate this point. A more debatable thesis would be:

Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* shows that man has no preeminence in nature through the immense danger the whale provides.

This new thesis not only notes that the whale is dangerous, but also makes an argument about why the text does this. Someone could argue that the story has a different theme and thus this thesis is debatable. Asking yourself: "could someone argue with my thesis?" is a good way to make sure you are getting beyond plot summary into your own ideas.

OTHER GENERAL ADVICE

Conclusions: So, you have written a paper but now you have no idea how to finish it. Here are some tips.

- **Yes, you do need a summary.**

Often, we worry about being repetitive. Your conclusion should not be a word-by-word copy of your thesis; however, you should provide a brief summary of your argument. Particularly no one remembers everything they read the first time, so your conclusion provides a quick refresher of your main points for your reader.

- **Include a so what.**

To keep your conclusion from being just a summary you need to make a move to connect your argument to the world at large. I call this move the "so what". After summarizing your argument ask yourself so what? Why should someone care about the point you have just made? What makes this paper worth reading?

This can be tricky but including this brings your conclusion to the next level. This so what does not have to provide a grand solution to all the world's problems but should simply try to explain why your argument is worth making. Why should someone care?

Organization: A genius argument will not be effective if your reader cannot follow the flow of your paper. Do not underestimate the importance of organization for an effective paper.

- **Do not start writing a rough draft immediately. Create an outline or basic framework first.**

No matter how good of a writer you are, you should not skip steps in the writing process. Doing a little prewriting before you sit down to churn out a paper



is key for maintaining organization. What kind of prewriting you do differs from person to person, but if you don't know where to start, I recommend creating an outline of just the thesis statement and topic sentences. Prewriting often gives your paper better structure because it forces you to plan before you write.

- **Topic and concluding sentences are the glue that hold your paper together.**

Once you start writing, maintaining structure is largely done through your topic and concluding sentences in each paragraph. The *topic sentence* acts as a mini thesis statement that outlines each paragraph. Once your paper is complete you should be able to read each topic sentence and have a clear understanding of the flow of your paper.

While many of us are good at focusing on our topic sentences we often forget to include a conclusion to each paragraph. The conclusion should act as a brief summary of what you have said in the paragraph as well as providing a lead into your next point. Sometimes we avoid concluding our thoughts at the end of paragraphs because we do not want to feel repetitive, but without a conclusion the end of your paragraphs will feel abrupt causing the paper to feel disjointed.

In summary, the topic sentence of a paragraph outlines the point of that paragraph while the concluding statement summarizes and ties that paragraph into your larger argument to create transition from one paragraph to the next.

- **Do not worry too much about being repetitive.**

Often times we become so worried about our papers being repetitive that we fail to explain ourselves clearly, and it becomes difficult for the reader to tie all the pieces together. For instance, you should not repeat your thesis statement word for word throughout your paper, but your thesis is your main argument and should be referred to throughout not just at the beginning and end.

As you write, it is important to remind readers what overall point you are trying to make and connect your smaller points (the topic of each paragraph) to your main argument (the thesis).

Assume a lazy reader. People generally are not going to flip back to your thesis over and over as they read to remind themselves of your argument so make sure to provide little refreshers throughout. Try not to think of this as being repetitive, but rather, being conscious of your readER by making your argument as easy to find and follow as possible.

Citations: Yes, citations are important, but do not let them overwhelm or excessively worry you.



- **Use your resources.**

Very few people actually have all the citation rules memorized. Do not be afraid to use online resources to help you. In fact if you go see a tutor they are probably going to refer you to an online guide. For MLA and APA the Purdue Owl online citation guide is amazing and I highly recommend using it.

If you are unsure about the specific citations your professor wants then ask. Office hours are there for a reason and a quick email to clarify what style your professor expects can save you hours of worry.

- **Be consistent.**

Once you have picked a style stick with it. Do not bounce between parenthetical citations and footnotes, or Chicago and MLA. You want it to be obvious that you meant to cite even if you used the wrong style or have a misunderstanding of a particular style.

- **Cite everything you got from an outside source.**

Unless your teacher specifically says otherwise cite everything you get from a source that is not your own brain. Citations are meant to prevent plagiarism and give credit where it is due.

In English papers, this rule is pretty easy to understand. In subjects like History, we run up against the idea of common knowledge, which is information that is well known enough that it does not require a citation such as the fact that George Washington was the first president. In classes such as this, it is important to listen to your professor's expectations about what information should and should not be cited. If you are unsure, you might try reading an article from this field to get an idea of what information is cited and what is not.