

During test

Found test hard

Saw Jeff cheating

After test

Got angry

Wanted to tell

Dismissed idea

In college

Understand implications of cheating

Understand goals of education

Exercise 7

Continue your work on the topic you selected in Exercise 6 (page 38). Brainstorm about your topic; then, select the ideas you plan to explore in your essay, and use either clustering or an informal outline to help you group related ideas together.

Understanding Thesis and Support

Once you have grouped your ideas, you need to consider your essay's thesis. A **thesis** is the main idea of your essay, its central point. The concept

Introductory paragraph

Thesis statement

Body paragraph
(support for thesis)

Body paragraph
(support for thesis)

Body paragraph
(support for thesis)

Body paragraph
(support for thesis)

Concluding paragraph

Restatement of thesis or review of key points

of *thesis and support* — stating your thesis and developing ideas that explain and expand it — is central to college writing.

The essays you write will consist of several paragraphs: an **introduction** that presents your thesis statement, several **body paragraphs** that develop and support your thesis, and a **conclusion** that reinforces your thesis and provides closure. Your thesis holds this structure together; it is the center that the rest of your essay develops around.

Developing a Thesis

Defining the Thesis Statement

A **thesis statement** is more than a *title*, an *announcement of your intent*, or a *statement of fact*. Although a descriptive title orients your readers, it is not detailed enough to reveal your essay’s purpose or direction. An announcement of your intent can reveal more, but it is stylistically distracting. Finally, a statement of fact — such as a historical fact or a statistic — is a dead end and therefore cannot be developed into an essay. For example, a statement like “Alaska became a state in 1959” or “Tuberculosis is highly contagious” or “The population of Greece is about ten million” provides your essay with no direction. However, a judgment or opinion *can* be an effective thesis — for instance, “The continuing threat of tuberculosis, particularly in the inner cities, suggests it is necessary to frequently test high-risk populations.”

Title	Hybrid Cars: Pro and Con
Announcement of intent	I will examine the pros and cons of hybrid cars that use both gasoline and electricity.
Statement of fact	Hybrid cars are more energy efficient than cars with standard gasoline engines.
Thesis statement	Hybrid cars that use both gasoline and electricity would decrease our country’s dependence on foreign oil.
Title	Orwell’s “A Hanging”
Announcement of intent	This paper will discuss George Orwell’s attitude toward the death penalty in his essay “A Hanging.”
Statement of fact	In his essay, Orwell describes a hanging that he witnessed in Burma.
Thesis statement	In “A Hanging,” George Orwell shows that capital punishment is not only brutal but also immoral.

Title	Speaking Out
Announcement of intent	This essay will discuss a time when I could have spoken out but did not.
Statement of fact	Once I saw someone cheating and did not speak out.
Thesis statement	As I look back at the cheating I witnessed, I wonder why I kept silent and what would have happened if I had acted.

WHAT A GOOD THESIS DOES

For writers

It helps writers plan an essay.
 It helps writers organize ideas in an essay.
 It helps writers unify all the ideas in an essay.

For readers

It identifies the main idea of an essay.
 It guides readers through an essay.
 It clarifies the subject and the focus of an essay.

Deciding on a Thesis

No rules determine when you formulate your thesis; the decision depends on the scope of your assignment, your knowledge of the subject, and your method of writing. When you know a lot about a subject, you may come up with a thesis before doing any invention activities (freewriting or brainstorming, for example). At other times, you may have to review your notes and then think of a single statement that communicates your position on the topic. Occasionally, your assignment may specify a thesis by telling you to take a particular position on a topic. In any case, you should decide on a thesis statement before you begin to write your first draft.

As you write, you will continue to discover new ideas, and you will probably move in directions that you did not anticipate. For this reason, the thesis statement you develop at this stage of the writing process is only **tentative**. Still, because a tentative thesis helps you to focus your ideas, it is essential at the initial stages of writing. As you draft your essay, review your thesis statement in light of the points you make, and revise it accordingly.

Stating Your Thesis

It is a good idea to include a one-sentence statement of your thesis early in your essay. An effective thesis statement has three characteristics:

1. **An effective thesis statement clearly expresses your essay's main idea.** It does more than state your topic; it indicates what you will say about your topic, and it signals how you will approach your material. The following thesis statement, from the essay “Grant and Lee: A Study in Contrasts” by Bruce Catton (page 393), clearly communicates the writer's main idea.

They [Grant and Lee] were two strong men, these oddly different generals, and they represented the strengths of two conflicting currents that, through them, had come into final collision.

This statement says that the essay will compare and contrast Grant and Lee. Specifically, it indicates that Catton will present the two Civil War generals as symbols of two opposing historical currents. If the statement had been less fully developed — for example, had Catton written, “Grant and Lee were quite different from each other” — it would have just echoed the essay's title.

2. **An effective thesis statement communicates your essay's purpose.** Whether your purpose is to evaluate or analyze or simply to describe or inform, your thesis statement should communicate that purpose to your readers. In general terms, your thesis can be **expressive**, conveying a mood or impression; it can be **informative**, perhaps listing the major points you will discuss or presenting an objective overview of the essay; or it can be **persuasive**, taking a strong stand or outlining the position you will argue.

Each of the following thesis statements communicates a different purpose.

To express feelings	The city's homeless families live in heartbreaking surroundings.
To inform	The plight of the homeless has become so serious that it is a major priority for many city governments.
To persuade	The best way to address the problems of the homeless is to renovate abandoned city buildings to create suitable housing for homeless families.

3. **An effective thesis statement is clearly worded.** To communicate your essay's main idea, an effective thesis statement should be clearly worded. (It should also speak for itself. It is not necessary to write, “My thesis is that . . .” or “The thesis of this paper is. . . .”) The thesis statement should give a straightforward and accurate indication of what follows, and it should not mislead readers about the essay's direction, emphasis, scope, content, or viewpoint. Vague language, confusing abstractions, irrelevant details, and unnecessarily complex terminology have no place in a thesis statement. Keep in mind, too, that your thesis statement should not make promises that your essay is not going to keep. For example, if you are going to discuss just the *effects* of new immigration laws, your thesis statement should not emphasize the events that resulted in their passage.

Your thesis statement cannot, of course, include every point you will discuss in your essay. Still, it should be specific enough to indicate your direction and scope. The sentence “New immigration laws have failed to stem the tide of illegal immigrants” is not an effective thesis statement because it does not give your essay much focus. Which immigration laws will you be examining? Which illegal immigrants? The following sentence, however, *is* an effective thesis statement. It clearly indicates what the writer is going to discuss, and it establishes a specific direction for the essay.

Because they do not take into account the economic causes of immigration, current immigration laws do little to decrease the number of illegal immigrants coming from Mexico into the United States.

Implying a Thesis

Like an explicitly stated thesis, an **implied thesis** conveys an essay’s purpose, but it does not do so explicitly. Instead, the selection and arrangement of the essay’s ideas suggest the purpose. Professional writers sometimes prefer this option because an implied thesis is subtler than a stated thesis. (An implied thesis is especially useful in narratives, descriptions, and some arguments, where an explicit thesis would seem heavy-handed or arbitrary.) In most college writing, however, you should state your thesis to avoid any risk of being misunderstood or of wandering away from your topic.

A STUDENT WRITER: Developing a Thesis

After experimenting with different ways of arranging her ideas for her essay, Laura Bobnak summed them up in a tentative thesis statement.

As I look back at the cheating I witnessed, I wonder why I kept silent and what would have happened if I had acted.



CHECKLIST

Stating Your Thesis

- Do you state your thesis in one complete, concise sentence?
- Does your thesis indicate your purpose?
- Is your thesis suited to the assignment?
- Does your thesis clearly convey the main idea you intend to support in your essay?
- Does your thesis suggest how you will organize your essay?

Exercise 8

Assess the strengths and weaknesses of the following as thesis statements.

1. My instructor has an attendance policy.
2. My instructor should change her attendance policy because it is bad.
3. My instructor should change her attendance policy because it is unreasonable, inflexible, and unfair.

4. For many people, a community college makes more sense than a four-year college or university.
5. Some children show violent behavior.
6. Violence is a problem in our society.
7. Conflict-resolution courses should be taught to help prevent violence in America's schools.
8. Social networking sites such as Facebook can cause problems.
9. Facebook attracts many college students.
10. College students should be careful of what material they put on their Facebook pages because prospective employers routinely check them.

Exercise 9

Rewrite the following factual statements to make them effective thesis statements. Make sure each thesis statement is a clearly and specifically worded sentence.

1. Many hospitals will not admit patients without health insurance because they are afraid that such patients will not be able to pay their bills.
2. Several Supreme Court decisions have said that art containing explicit sexual images is not necessarily pornographic.
3. Many women earn less money than men do, in part because they drop out of the workforce during their child-rearing years.
4. People who watch more than five hours of television a day tend to think the world is more violent than do people who watch less than two hours of television daily.
5. In recent years, the suicide rate among teenagers — especially middle- and upper-middle-class teenagers — has risen dramatically.

Exercise 10

Read the following sentences from “The Argument Culture” by Deborah Tannen. Then, formulate a one-sentence thesis statement that summarizes the key points Tannen makes about the nature of argument in our culture.

- “More and more, our public interactions have become like arguing with a spouse.”
- “Nearly everything is framed as a battle or game in which winning or losing is the main concern.”
- “The argument culture pervades every aspect of our lives today.”
- “Issues from global warming to abortion are depicted as two-sided arguments, when in fact most Americans’ views lie somewhere in the middle.”
- “What’s wrong with the argument culture is the ubiquity, the knee-jerk nature of approaching any issue, problem, or public person in an adversarial way.”