Formulating a Good Thesis

What is a thesis? A thesis is a sentence asserting the main point of your essay.

Know the difference between a topic and a thesis.

Examples:

**Topic**: My night in jail.
**Thesis**: After my night in jail, I will have more respect for prisoner’s rights.

**Topic**: Phone tapping is an issue of civil liberties.
**Thesis**: When government officials place innocent citizens under observation and routinely tap one another’s phones, everyone’s civil liberties are threatened.
**Thesis**: Despite its infringement of civil liberties, phone tapping is the most effective device the government has for procuring evidence in criminal cases.

Limit the scope of your thesis.

**Thesis too broad**: Garage sales reflect the times we live in.
**Thesis improved**: Garage sales circulate goods during periods of high inflation and high unemployment. (“The times” are carefully defined.)

**Thesis too broad**: Late marriages are creating a different kind of American family life.
**Thesis improved**: Because marriage is often postponed to accommodate careers, Americans are creating a new kind of family in which parents are old enough to be their children’s grandparents. (Reason for late marriage and a detailed explanation of “different” belong in the thesis.)

Three things characterize a good thesis.

1. It should be so clear that it leaves no doubt in your mind, or in your reader’s, about what you are going to discuss in your essay.
2. It should take a stand based on your informed opinion.
3. It should be specific enough to give your essay a good, strong push in the direction you want to go.

Examples:

- Despite predictions to the contrary from parents and church groups, coeducational college dormitories have not proved to be hotbeds of promiscuity.
- Although nuclear, solar, and fusion power are promising energy sources, each also has serious disadvantages.
- In “A Hanging,” George Orwell shows that capital punishment is not only immoral, but innatural.
- Though the president has repeatedly promised to control unemployment, his three major programs to date have failed to solve the problem.
Contrary to popular assumptions, myths are more than fairy stories; they are tales that express the underlying attitudes a society has toward important issues.

How to write a thesis statement:
1. Start with an assertion.
   Fresno is a great place to live
2. Ask why, then answer with a because clause.
   because of its location, climate, and cultural.
3. If your thesis is controversial, begin the thesis with the objection in an although, despite, contrary to clause.
   Contrary to Rand McNally’s opinion, Fresno is a great place to live because of its location, climate, and cultural diversity.

Here are some more examples.
- Although some students find their freshman year exciting and rewarding, many others find it depressing, because they have moved away from their parents’ homes for the first time, because it is painful to be separated from established friends, and because homework and grading are usually more demanding than they were in high school.
- Although men and women in college should certainly have equal opportunities to participate in sports, the government should not insist on equal expenditures for men’s and women’s athletic programs, because in colleges where a football program exists it requires disproportionately high expenditures, and because such a program can produce income to support the entire spectrum of men’s and women’s athletics.

A mouthful? Sound boring? Yes. But don’t worry: it will not appear anywhere in the body of your essay. It is just a roadmap to help you organize your essay to make sure that you are in control of your material.

*Adapted from *The Random House Handbook* by Frederick Crews and *Patterns for College Writing* by Kirszner and Mandell.
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