

# ACADEMIC ARGUMENTS/THESIS STATEMENTS

Brought to you by the *Writingcenter* at Washington College

<https://washcoll.edu/offices/writing-center>

## **A thesis**

- makes a narrow, focused, and plausible claim that is refutable, and therefore must be supported with evidence
- answers a “how” or “why” question that arises from the text, research, or topic at hand (this question *may be* provided by your professor, or may be a question that arises for you when you are engaging with the subject)
- identifies the relationship between ideas, often addressing the tension between existing assumptions or claims and the claims the writer wants to make
- will evolve over the course of the essay as you account for evidence

## **A thesis should not**

- state the obvious. Remember, an argument needs to be contestable.
- offer an idea based solely on personal conviction or personal opinion. Opinions without evidence do not make for good academic arguments.
- generalize broadly about a topic. There is no way your essay is able to address society in general, all of history, etc.

## **Arguments in the Disciplines**

While the concepts above are generally true across all subject areas, there are some differences in the ways in which different disciplines approach argument, so make sure to learn from your professor what type of thesis is expected. Here are *a few examples* for how arguments may vary:

**History:** An argument for a history assignment often takes a stance (offers an interpretation of) a particular historical event or time period. “Historians try to solve puzzles in the evidence and to tell a story that will give order to the confusion of data we inherit from the past. Historians make connections, uncover patterns, locate dead ends, and find influences that continue through the generations until the present.”<sup>1</sup>

**Natural Sciences:** An argument in the natural sciences (especially for reports on experiments) will often offer a hypothesis for the expected outcome of research. The experiment’s methods and results will ultimately confirm, refute, or complicate that initial hypothesis. “In most cases, you should locate your hypothesis in terms of where and whether it fits existing knowledge and current theory... It may challenge alternative hypothesis or even existing theory.”<sup>2</sup>

**Literature:** An argument for literary studies offers an interpretive argument of a text or texts. “[The writer of a literary argument essay] builds a solid argument to substantiate his or her interpretation or theory. Such an argument is based on... a close reading of the text itself. A good piece of interpretive criticism is complete and comprehensive; it offers the audience a sound theory that fits with the experience of audience members and that ties together related threads in their understanding.”<sup>3</sup>

1. From *A Short Guide to Writing About History*, by Richard Marius and Melvin E. Page.

2. From *A Short Guide to Writing About Science*, by David Porush.

3. From *Research and Writing Across the Curriculum*, by Christine A. Hult

# ACADEMIC ARGUMENTS/THESIS STATEMENTS, continued.

Here are some examples of weak thesis statements and how to fix them.\*

## *The Thesis Makes No Claim*

**Weak thesis:** “I am going to write about Darwin’s concerns with evolution in *The Origin of Species*” (*This thesis implies what follows is a report, it is not an argument*)

**Stronger thesis:** “Darwin’s concern with survival of the fittest in *The Origin of Species* initially leads him to neglect a potentially conflicting aspect of his theory of evolution—survival as a matter of interdependence.”

## *The Thesis is Obviously True or is a Statement of Fact*

**Weak thesis:** “The flight from teaching to research and publishing in higher education is a controversial issue in the academic world. I will show different views and aspects concerning this problem.” (*This thesis is a statement. The writer does not take a stance on the controversy*)

**Stronger thesis:** “The ‘flight from teaching’ to research and publishing in higher education is a controversial issue in the academic world. As I will attempt to show, the controversy is based to a significant degree on a false assumption, that doing research necessarily leads teachers away from the classroom.”

## *The Thesis Bases Its Claim on Personal Conviction*

**Weak thesis:** “Sir Thomas More’s *Utopia* proposes an unworkable set of solutions to society’s problems because, like communist Russia, it suppresses individualism” (*The idea that the text proposes “unworkable set of solutions” is based on personal conviction*).

**Stronger thesis:** “Sir Thomas More’s *Utopia* treats individualism as a serious but remarkable social problem. His radical treatment of what we might now call “socialization” attempts to redefine the meaning and origin of individual identity”

## *The Thesis Makes an Overly Broad Claim*

**Weak thesis:** “Violent revolutions have both positive and negative results for man” (*This is incredibly broad. Positive how? Negative how?*).

**Stronger thesis:** “Although violent revolutions begin to redress long-standing social inequities, they often do so at the cost of long-term economic dysfunction and the suffering that attends it”

\* Adapted from *Writing Analytically*, 5th edition, Chapter 12