

# Elements of a Great Thesis Statement

The following is an example of a classic thesis statement:

“High school sports have a positive influence on students because they teach social skills, require time management, and provide an opportunity for regular exercise.”

As this demonstrates, a thesis statement includes the following three elements:

**a topic** (“High school sports”) + **a claim** (“have a positive influence”) + **points to support the claim** (“because they teach social skills, require time management, and provide regular exercise”)

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However, there are several additional elements to make a **great** thesis statement:

- A great thesis should not merely announce the topic
  - Don’t just tell the audience what you’re going to tell them
  - Poor thesis statement (Just a statement): “*In this paper, I will discuss the relationship between fairy tales and early childhood.*”
  - Better thesis statement (Lets the reader know the claim you are making about the topic): “*Not just empty stories for kids, fairy tales shed light on the psychology of young children by exploring universal themes such as resilience and curiosity.*”
- A great thesis statement should present a strong argument through a claim, not a mere fact
  - Don’t be bland, don’t be neutral. Take a strong position
  - Your thesis statement should represent your opinion that you will back up with solid evidence throughout your essay
  - Poor thesis statement (Just a fact): “*The first polygraph was developed by Dr. John Larson in 1921.*”
  - Better thesis statement (Presents an opinion/argument that can be supported with evidence): “*Because the polygraph has not been proved reliable, its use by private employers should be banned.*”
- A great thesis statement needs to be contestable
  - Don’t write thesis statements that reflect universal truths: “*most humans want to be free of pain.*”
  - Present a view that you know someone might completely disagree with based on their own opinion and their own set of evidence (this is what academic dialogue is about)
  - Poor thesis statement (Not contestable): “*Although we have the right to say what we want, we should always avoid hurting other people’s feelings.*”
  - Better thesis statement (Contestable): “*The ‘fighting words’ exception to free speech is not legitimate because it wrongly considers speech as an action.*”

- A great thesis statement needs to be focused, not too vague
  - A thesis statement that's too vague often cannot be proven, and will lead to a paper that's weak and not organized: *"Kale is nutritious and a great source of health."*
  - The thesis statement needs to be specific enough to be proven within the scope/length of your paper. Hone in on a certain angle of your topic and be sure to maintain that angle throughout your paper.
  - Poor thesis statement (Too Vague): *"Hemingway's war stories are very good."*
  - Better thesis statement (Specific and clear): *"Hemingway's war stories helped create a new writing style by using extensive dialogue, shorter sentences, and stronger words."*
- A great thesis statement suggests the structure and flow of the paper
  - Including the points that logically support the essay's claim allows the reader to anticipate the sequence of the argument.
  - Poor thesis statement (A list without specific support): *"The North and South fought the Civil War for many reasons, some of which were the same and some different."*
  - Better thesis statement (Includes support for the claim): *"While both sides fought the Civil War over the issue of slavery, the North fought for moral reasons while the South fought to preserve its own institutions."*
- A great thesis statement evolves (needs to evolve!) as you are working on your paper
  - Be prepared to amend your initial thesis statement several times as you are writing your paper, doing additional research and collecting additional evidence about your topic
  - You might even end up completely re-writing your thesis statement!

### **Additional Resource: "The Thesis Test"**

1. Is this a complete sentence (and not a question)?
2. Does it have an opposing argument?
3. Is every word clear and unambiguous in meaning?
4. Is the sentence a dead end, or does it call for additional information and explanation?
5. Does the statement make such a large claim that you believe the writer has no hope of proving it to be true in the space of 7 to 10 pages?
6. What evidence will you need to see before you will believe that the thesis is true?

Excerpted from csnu.edu (California State University, Northridge, amended) and Shanleyworld.com