

THESIS STATEMENTS IN LITERARY ANALYSIS PAPERS

*The thesis statement is one of the (if not *the*) most important parts of your paper—think of it as the foundation of a house—if your foundation is weak and poorly constructed, what do you think happens to the house?

*The thesis statement is the announcement of your analytical argument that you intend to make and prove in the duration of your paper. It is a road map for the paper—it tells the reader what to expect from the rest of the paper.

*It should be placed somewhere in the Introduction of your paper—Many like to put it as the last sentence(s) of their Intro which is fine.

*Successful thesis statements provoke thought and should read beautifully.

*Your thesis statement should include two parts: WHAT and WHY.

*WHAT: What claim are you making about the text?

*WHY: Why should we care? Why is your claim important? Your thesis should answer the “so what?” question.

*A thesis statement is usually, but can be more than, one sentence long.

Examples of Literary Thesis Statements:

* “Mark Twain’s *Huckleberry Finn* is a great American novel.”

*What’s wrong with this thesis statement?

*An opinion about the book, not an argument.

* “In *Huckleberry Finn*, Mark Twain develops a contrast between life on the river and life on the shore.”

*Better? How so? What is still missing?

*Doesn’t answer the “so what?” question—what is the point of the contrast? What does the contrast signify?

* “Through its contrasting river and shore scenes, Twain’s *Huckleberry Finn* suggests that to find the true expression of American ideals, one must leave ‘civilized’ society and go back to nature.”

*Even better?

*It presents an interpretation of a literary work based on an analysis of its content and answers the “so what” question.

* “Edgar Allan Poe’s work was affected greatly by the current events of his life, covering his family life, his childhood, and his career; these events changed his style and subject of his works.”

*What’s wrong with this thesis statement?

*More questions than answers: which works will be explored? What current events? What childhood or career events? How did Poe’s style change and WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

* “There is a lot of symbolism in *The Scarlet Letter*.”

*Bad? Why?

* “Hawthorne’s use of symbolism in *The Scarlet Letter* falters and ultimately breaks down with the introduction of the character Pearl.”

*Better? Why?

* “The character of Ben in Arthur Miller’s *Death of a Salesman* is a great [or important, or crucial, or unforgettable, etc.] character.”

*What’s wrong with thesis?

*This does not say enough to serve as the basis for an essay. Besides, each of these judgments is entirely a matter of personal opinion because none of them define the criteria by which the judgment is being made.

* “Through Paul’s experience behind the lines, at a Russian prisoner of war camp, and especially under bombardment in the trenches Erich Maria Remarque realistically shows how war dehumanizes a man.”

*What can we anticipate that the author of this thesis will prove to us in the rest of the paper?

More Help for Thesis statement

An argumentative paper makes a claim about a topic and justifies this claim with specific evidence. The claim could be an opinion, a policy proposal, an evaluation, a cause-and-effect statement, or an interpretation. The goal of the argumentative paper is to convince the audience that the claim is true based on the evidence provided.

- Your thesis statement should be specific—it should cover only what you will discuss in your paper and should be supported with specific evidence.
- The thesis statement usually appears at the end of the first paragraph of a paper.
- Your topic may change as you write, so you may need to revise your thesis statement to reflect exactly what you have discussed in the paper.

A thesis statement is an assertion, not a statement of fact or an observation.

- Fact or observation: People use many lawn chemicals.
- Thesis: People are poisoning the environment with chemicals merely to keep their lawns clean.

A thesis statement is "a basic argument" that clearly articulates what the thesis or is expected to demonstrate

What is Literary Analysis?

It's literary

It's an analysis

It's--

An Argument!

It may also involve research on and analysis of secondary sources

How is it "literary"?

Usually, a literary analysis will involve a discussion of a text *as writing*, thus the term literary, which means "having to do with letters"

This will involve the use of certain concepts that are very specifically associated with literature

Important literary concepts

The Basics

Plot

Setting

Narration/point of view

Characterization

Symbol

Metaphor

Genre

Irony/ambiguity

Other key concepts

Historical context

Social, political, economic contexts

Ideology

Multiple voices

Various critical orientations

Literary theory

How Can I Learn More?

There are various handbooks of literary terms available in most libraries.

There are numerous introductions to literary criticism and theory that are widely available.

Example: *A Handbook to Literature*. Harmon/Holman

What is an Analysis?

An analysis of a literary work may discuss

How the various components of an individual work relate to each other

How two separate literary works deal with similar concepts or forms

How concepts and forms in literary works relate to larger aesthetic, political, social, economic, or religious contexts

How is a literary analysis an argument?

When writing a literary analysis, you will focus on specific attribute(s) of the text(s).

When discussing these attributes, you will want to make sure that you are making a specific, arguable point (thesis) about these attributes.

You will defend this point with reasons and evidence drawn from the text. (Much like a lawyer!)

Which is the best thesis statement?

Moby-Dick is about the problem of evil.

Moby-Dick is boring and pointless.

Moby-Dick is about a big, white whale.

The use of “whiteness” in *Moby-Dick* illustrates the uncertainty about the meaning of life that Ishmael expresses throughout the novel.

How do I support a thesis statement?

Examples from the text:

Direct quotations

Summaries of scenes

Paraphrase

Other critics’ opinions

Historical and social context

Always remember to read carefully and highlight useful passages and quotes!

What is a secondary source?

A book or article that discusses the text you are discussing

A book or article that discusses a theory related to the argument you are making

A book or article that discusses the social and historical context of the text you are discussing

How do I find secondary sources?

MLA International Bibliography

Dictionary of Literary Biography

Discipline-specific sources

Example: *America: History and Life for American literature*

Other search engines

A bibliography that is part of your text

Ask someone who knows

Integrating secondary sources

When you use secondary sources, be sure to show how they relate to your thesis

Don’t overuse any one secondary source, or for that matter, secondary sources in general

Remember this is your paper, your argument—the secondary sources are just helping you out.

Never, never, never plagiarize!

Overview of Literary Analysis:

When writing a literary analysis:

Be familiar with literary terms

Analyze specific items

Make an argument

Make appropriate use of secondary sources

Consult instructors and tutors for help when needed