THESIS STATEMENT DOs and DON’Ts

Every essay needs a thesis statement. It not only states the writer’s position or argument but also gives the reader a general progression of main points. Follow these guidelines to create a coherent thesis.

Do:

- **Establish the manageable boundaries of your paper.**
  As a writer, you must judge whether your thesis statement commits you to something too long, too short, or just right for your instructor’s required length.

- **Narrow the subject to a single, central subject and significant ideas that the essay will support.**
  Ensure that your thesis makes a point about a topic. Avoid creating just a laundry list of information you find. After your central subject is identified, articulate your main points in the order you will present them.

- **State your position or the point you are arguing, not just a summary of information.**
  Your thesis should state your position on the points you are arguing. It should synthesize and bring together your analysis of the primary text by making an argument that is not already obvious. In the end, your readers should be able to argue with your thesis statement.

- **Revise as needed as you write, and later revise, your paper.**
  As you write your paper, re-evaluate your thesis statement. Do your main points branch away from the thesis statement? Do you focus on a minor point made in the thesis statement? Because the thesis statement is the reader’s guide to your paper, make sure it is accurate with regard to the content of your paper.

- **Use specific language.**
  Avoid vague words like “things” and “good.” (Instead of saying your subject is good, for example, say why it’s good, or what makes it good. Similarly, instead of saying “things” try to state specifically what “things” you mean.) In other words, make sure your thesis passes the “how and why” test. If a reader’s first response to your thesis is “how?” or “why?” then your thesis may be too vague.

- **Write in third person.**
  Do not use “I” in your thesis statement. Your thesis statement should focus on the point or argument that you will establish throughout the paper; make a firm provable statement rather than saying “I think” or “I believe.”

Last updated 6/13/19
Don’t:

- **Focus solely on the subject or a title.**
  - Examples: Racial Conflict in “Desiree’s Baby”
  - Mountain Climbing Challenges

In these instances, the writers have an excellent title for their papers but do not develop the topic with a focused thesis statement. Remember that thesis statements must be complete thoughts.

- **Ask a question.**
  - Examples: At the end of the story, the reader must ask, “Did Armand really grapple with his own ‘blackness’?”
  - At the end of my climb, I wondered if I had really overcome my psychological limits.

Here the writers pose an excellent starting point—questions about a short story and a personal experience—that could lead to a thesis statement. The questions themselves, however, cannot stand alone as a thesis.

- **Make an announcement.**
  - Examples: In this paper, I will examine the dynamics of race in the Old South as portrayed by Kate Chopin in her short story “Desiree’s Baby.”
  - This essay will discuss how I handled challenges in mountain climbing.

No writer in the humanities begins a paper with an announcement of the topic. Avoid phrases like “I am going to…” or “This paper will…” Furthermore, the first example announcement does not make a statement of significance about the dynamics of race in the Old South; the second presents a topic but with no focus.

- **State a fact.**
  - Examples: Desiree’s unknown parentage will ultimately make her marriage complicated.
  - I met many physical and psychological challenges when I climbed Mt. Everest.

An author must do more than just state a fact in the theses; she must answer the “so what” question as well. The reader of the above statements will likely say “so what,” or more colloquially, “duh.” Instead, you want your thesis to say something surprising and debatable. If your thesis doesn't go beyond summarizing or merely identifying your topic, it's descriptive and not yet argumentative.

- **Quote or reference secondary material.**
  - Examples: Critic Marjorie More notes that “Desiree ultimately succumbs to victim status rather than confronting or fleeing the racism of her husband” (12).
  - Many authors have written about the challenges of climbing Mt. Everest, in particular about the famous “dead zone, where one climber, through almost superhuman endurance, survived the impossible” (“Mt. Everest”).

These writers are substituting another’s insight or observations in place of his/her own thesis statement. While these sources could work well in a body paragraph to add support to the author’s claim, the author must first make that claim for herself in the thesis.