

The Thesis Statement

A thesis statement is a critical part of writing an effective essay. It is the controlling idea around which your essay is built, a concise statement of your essay's argument, a point of view adopted about a historical problem, and a proposition to be defended or argued. The basic elements of a strong thesis include a statement that deals with all aspects of the topic suggested by the question, takes a clear position on the issue, provides an organizational framework from which to structure your essay, and addresses the core issues defined by the question. A strong thesis passes the A.C.I.D. test:

- A. All aspects of the topic addressed
- C. Clear position on the issues
- I. Infrastructure to build on
- D. Directly targets the question

Look at the following essay prompt and the three thesis statements offered as possible beginnings in answering the prompt.

Assess the validity of the following statement: "The utopian societies of the 1830s and 1840s formed in response to the social and economic upheavals that affected America after the War of 1812."

Thesis 1: Political changes led to the rise of utopian communities. However due to many changes in America following the War of 1812, utopian societies developed more as the result social and economic upheavals.

Thesis 2: The rise of utopian societies was due to the emerging Market Revolution. However due to increasing urbanization and increasing immigration after the War of 1812 social upheavals played a greater role in causing the development of utopian societies.

Thesis 3: Many people sought alternative lifestyles in the 1830s due to the rise of Jacksonian democracy, the increasing support for the concept of common man, and the development of the abolitionist movement.

The best thesis statement is #2. It passes the A.C.I.D. test. It deals with economic and social issues; it takes a clear position that these factors caused utopian societies to form; it provides an organization framework to the structure of the essay (i.e. Market Revolution, growth of cities, impact of immigration); and it deals with the topics suggested by the question. Statement #1 is too general. It does not identify the changes that affected America, give a structure for the essay, or address the core issues of economic and social issues. It does take a weak position on the question, however. #3 is a weak thesis statement because it is off topic. There is a danger that it will take the paper in the wrong direction. Following it, a writer is likely to drift into politics and

abolition. It may address utopian societies – but only a secondary way. On the positive side, it does take a position and provides an organizational framework. In fact, it is actually a good thesis for a different question!

The thesis will follow this formula: “X. However due to A, B, and C, Y.” Y is your assertion; what the essay is attempting to prove while the A, B, and C points provide the essay’s organizational structure. The X statement provides the counterargument or alternative point of view. While the emphasis of the thesis is on organization and not detailed explanation, the thesis statement must not be too general or too specific. The thesis statement should tell the reader where you are going, but should not give away all your information. You want the reader to keep reading. You should aim for Level Two Specificity. Consider the following prompt and thesis statements:

“Analyze the ways in which the Vietnam War heightened social, political, and economic tensions in the United States. Focus your answer on the period 1964 – 1975.”

Level Three Thesis (not enough specificity): Many Americans supported the foreign policy of containment during the Cold War. However, due to an increase in social, political, and economic tensions in the United States from 1964 – 1975, the Vietnam War damaged Americans’ confidence in themselves and their government. *(This tells the reader nothing more than what has already been stated in the prompt. You have a thesis statement; however, it is much too general. This is the most common mistake students make.)*

Level Two Thesis: Many Americans supported the foreign policy of containment during the Cold War. However, due to growing unrest and disenchantment over why the war was being fought, who should run it, and how much American economic investment should be expended to win the war the Vietnam War, during the period 1964-1975, damaged Americans’ confidence in themselves and their government

Level One Thesis (too much specificity): Many Americans supported the foreign policy of containment during the Cold War. However, due to riots organized by the Black Panthers, tensions over the Great Society’s war on poverty and the economic ability to continue the war, sit-ins that plagued college campuses, the clash between Hippies and the Silent Majority over America’s role in international affairs, and fighting between Congress and the President over the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution and the War Powers Act regarding how much power each should have in waging the war, the Vietnam war, during the period 1964-1975, damaged Americans’ confidence in themselves and their government. *(There is too much specific information in this thesis.)*