

WRITING AN EFFECTIVE THESIS STATEMENT (PODCAST 24 TRANSCRIPT)

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Greetings everyone. This is Kurtis Clements with another effective writing podcast. In this episode, I am going to discuss how to write an effective thesis statement.

One issue to keep in mind when you write is that your words need to stand on their own. It is your responsibility to express your thoughts in a way that others can understand. Think of it this way: You will not be around to explain to readers what you meant by a certain remark or to offer another example to illustrate a fuzzy point. Indeed, the words in your composition will have to communicate meaning without your presence. What you do not want to have happen is for your audience to reach the end of a piece of your written communication and say, "So what? What's the point?"

The "so what" of a piece of writing is the specific point the piece makes, what the writing says about its subject. The "so what" is what the writing adds up to. It is the meaning found in the writing. The "so what" of an informative essay may be *Boston has a lot to offer young children*. The "so what" of a business memo may be *profits have exceeded expectations*.

No matter the type of composition, the piece of writing must communicate meaning, not to the writer, but, rather, to an audience. The meaning found in a piece of writing, the "so what," is the most important aspect of any piece of writing, for what good would a piece of writing be if it did not add up to something, if it did not say something to an audience? When you are working on a composition, you will need to think about what you are trying to say so that you are in a position to make sure that what you are trying to communicate is, in fact, communicated.

I know what you're thinking: What's all this have to do with a thesis statement? The answer: everything! Let me explain.

Every composition needs to make a clear point about its topic—otherwise, what purpose would the writing serve? One way to ensure that readers will follow along in the development of an essay is by including a written out thesis statement (more on this in just a moment). The word *thesis* comes from a Greek word that means "proposition" or "position." In an essay, the thesis establishes the writer's position, the main idea of the paper, what the writer claims to be true or important about the topic. A thesis helps readers understand the direction the essay is heading and it connects body paragraphs to a controlling idea so that the essay comes together as a unified whole.

Most thesis statements are expressed in a single declarative sentence, but depending on a number of factors such as the scope and complexity of the topic or the writer's approach in discussing it, the thesis may require more than one sentence, but this is the exception rather than the rule. In most academic writing, the thesis will appear near or at the end of the introduction and announce to readers exactly what the body paragraphs that follow will discuss. In some writing, especially personal



writing, a written-out thesis may not be necessary, but regardless the focus of the paper still needs to be clear. So, whether the thesis is written out verbatim or not, the thesis of the paper—what it will discuss—still needs to be clear.

Constructing a thesis statement will take time; in fact, like writing itself, developing a thesis is a process, so you will need to be patient and be willing to revise as necessary. A good thesis comes about the more you explore your topic whether that exploration is the result of exploratory writing like freewriting or research or long walks in which you think and think and think.

As you explore your thinking, your ideas will get clearer and clearer. Again, a thesis statement evolves over time. Begin with a working thesis—your tentative ideas about a topic—and be willing to modify the statement depending on what you discover about your topic and how your thinking changes over time. Indeed, many writers find themselves in jams because they are unwilling to deviate from their original thesis and are bent on trying to support ideas that are unrealistic, perhaps even impossible.

Still worse, some writers try to force the content to fit the idea expressed in the thesis. This won't work. In fact, some writers approach their work so that the thesis emerges out of the writing. That's right! Some writers don't start with a thesis—working or otherwise—and, instead, explore their thinking in writing as a way to discover what it is they have to say about a topic. The fabulous Donald Murray, a journalist and famous writer about the process of writing, worked this way. And other writers work this way, too. And of course, many writers do not work this way and the truth is the actual process you use to develop a thesis does not matter so long as the end result is successful.

As you approach drafting a thesis, make sure you keep your purpose for writing in mind. Will you be informing? Persuading? Entertaining? Complaining? Whatever the case, you will want that purpose to be apparent from the construction of the thesis.

One good way to come up with ideas that you can use to construct a working thesis is to explore your thoughts. What do you already know about the topic? Use freewriting (or some other exploratory writing method such as brainstorming) to capture what you already know and think about the topic. Roll up your sleeves and spend 10, 15, or more minutes just writing. Write about what interests you about the topic and what you might like to know. Explore freely what is bouncing around inside your head and do not be afraid to follow your thinking wherever it takes you. Writing is an act of discovery, and you might stumble upon an interesting angle to pursue if you give yourself permission to explore. After you've written for a period of time, look over your writing and see if any dominant idea emerges or if some of the writing suggests a direction worth thinking about more. In a perfect world, the freewriting will produce enough of your ideas that you can almost see the beginning of a thesis.

Another good approach to producing a thesis is to conduct some research. Some assignments may not benefit from this tip, but many—even those that don't specifically require research—will. To this end, peruse the library whether you do so physically or virtually. Poke and read around about your topic, following the discussion here and there depending on what interests you. Take some notes as you see fit.

You could also ask questions about what you wonder or would like to know about your topic. Do big-box stores such as Home Depot and Wal-Mart have an impact on local economies? What are the



benefits of a vegan lifestyle? How costly are green energy sources? What steps should individuals take to safeguard against identity fraud? Avoid yes/no type questions and research accordingly. A good research question can lend itself to the development of a working thesis in that the “answer” can serve as a starting point.

So what are the characteristics of an effective thesis statement?

An effective thesis statement establishes one major idea. If a thesis introduces more than one idea, the paper will not have a tight focus. Most papers you will write will be relatively short and do not have room to discuss more than one major idea. Pay particular attention to your thesis statement if it includes the word “and” as this connecting word often joins new ideas. Note how the following thesis has more than one main idea: *Healthcare reform must be addressed because so many Americans are uninsured or without adequate coverage, and politicians must work together to ensure new legislation is passed.* In this example, the word “and” establishes an additional main idea and so the thesis lacks a clearly defined focus. To improve upon the thesis, the thesis would need to be streamlined and focus on one main idea. For example, a better thesis might be *Politicians must work together to reform healthcare because too many Americans are without sufficient coverage.*

An effective thesis statement is limited in scope. The thesis should limit the extent of the discussion to something manageable given the assignment—neither too broad nor too narrow. The thesis should establish a focus that is realistic and suitable for a substantive discussion of the main idea. Taking a stand on capital punishment, for example, is not realistic for a short research paper let alone an entire book—the topic is too broad. However, limiting the focus by narrowing the scope may work. You could argue that capital punishment does not reduce the crime rate or that lethal injection is the most humane form of capital punishment. In this way, the focus is something that realistically could be addressed in the paper.

An effective thesis statement clearly states the writer’s position. The thesis should state precisely and specifically what the paper will discuss. After reading the thesis, readers should know exactly what to expect. Avoid language that is too general, abstract, or otherwise confusing. If your thesis does not clearly establish your main idea, readers may have a difficult time following the development of the body paragraphs that follow. Here is an example of a thesis statement that is vague: *Television violence is an issue that many face.* Based on this thesis, do you understand what the writer is going to explore in the paper? Sure, television violence, but beyond that general subject, do you have any clear sense of what the writer will be exploring? Not at all! This thesis lacks the specificity it needs to orient readers appropriately so that they know what to expect in the discussion.

An effective thesis statement requires supporting evidence. The thesis expresses an idea that moves beyond a statement of fact and requires supporting content to “prove” the main idea. For example, a thesis that proclaims *Barack Obama is the first African-American to be elected president of the United States* would not be very good as it states a widely known fact. A better thesis might proclaim this: *Barack Obama’s election as president of the United States marked a seminal moment in American politics.* The revised thesis moves beyond simply stating a fact and, instead, presents a main idea that would require evidence to support.

There are two basic approaches to composing a thesis—forecasting the main points by embedding



them in the thesis (an approach commonly referred to as the three-point thesis) or not including the main points in the thesis. Your approach will depend on the topic you are addressing as well as any particular requirements of the assignment.

A three-point thesis states the main idea of the essay and includes three key points as support. Take a look at the following thesis: *Banning cigarette smoking in public places is an effective intervention to improve the public's health by helping to reduce the dangers of second-hand smoke on non-smokers, encouraging current smokers to quit, and reducing healthcare costs.* In this example, the main idea—the position the writer takes relative to the topic—is *Banning cigarette smoking in public places is an effective intervention to improve the public's health.* This part of the thesis states what the writer claims to be true about the topic. How will the writer support this view? In this case, the thesis includes three telegraphed key points—*by helping to reduce the dangers of second-hand smoke on non-smokers, encouraging current smokers to quit, and reducing healthcare costs.*

The three-point thesis is the blueprint of the essay in that it not only establishes the main idea, but it also fleshes out the key points to that readers can anticipate a basic structure of the essay. Readers would expect each forecasted point to be discussed in the order presented—that is, the first section will discuss the first key point, the next section the second, and so on.

Another approach to composing a thesis is to state the main idea minus the key points. Using the example above, the thesis would read: *Banning cigarette smoking in public places is an effective intervention to improve the public's health.* With this approach, the key points are not included in the thesis, yet the focus and direction are clear. Readers may not know the exact key points, but they understand the writer's position on the topic and can anticipate the likely discussion that will follow. In this case, since the main idea states the view that banning smoking in public is an effective intervention to improve public health, it is logical to expect key points that address how this is so.

Please keep in mind that writing a good thesis is a process and a process requires time. While some folks might be able to come up with a humdinger of a thesis from the get-go that is not the norm. To this end, give yourself time to explore your topic and don't be impatient. Draft a working thesis and revise as necessary. I hope you find this podcast helpful.

Thanks, everyone. Happy writing!

