

5 Tips for Writing an Effective Thesis Statement

An effective thesis statement fulfills the following criteria. It should be:

Substantial - Your thesis should be a claim for which it is easy to answer every reader's question: "So what?"

Supportable - A thesis must be a claim that you can prove with the evidence at hand (e.g., evidence from your texts or from your research). Your claim should not be outlandish, nor should it be mere personal opinion or preference (e.g., "Frederick Douglass is my favorite historical figure.")

Precise - An effective thesis statement has been narrowed down from a very broad subject. Your claim should not be something on which whole books could be written.

Arguable - A thesis statement should not be a statement of fact or an assertion with which every reader is likely to immediately agree. (Otherwise, why try to convince your readers with an argument?)

Relevant - If you are responding to an assignment, the thesis should answer the question your teacher has posed. In order to stay focused, pay attention to the task words in the assignment: summarize, argue, compare/contrast, etc.

What's Wrong With These Thesis Statements?

1. Frederick Douglass made a speech in which he wondered why slaves should celebrate the Fourth of July.
This sentence is a statement of fact. There is nothing to be argued here.
2. Of all examples of persuasive speaking in American history, Frederick Douglass' "What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July" is far and away the most effective.
This sentence offers only the writer's opinion. The writer does not offer arguable criteria for why this speech is effective.
3. Douglass' speech is completely ineffective, since he admits early in his speech that the anti-slavery position is self-evidently just and does not require argument. To be persuasive, speakers must always take positions which they and their speakers consider arguable.
This thesis makes a claim that the writer can probably not support with the assigned text.
4. Throughout American history, brave leaders have stood up against oppression of all kinds.
This sentence is much too broad. A more effective thesis would narrow the topic down to a particular leader.