Crafting an Effective Thesis Statement

I. Preparation

A. Read (or re-read) your assignment and underline the "task" words, which are directions like analyze, describe, define, and compare. Be sure that you read the whole assignment: teachers often use more than one task word, and you'll want to be sure that address them all.

B. If your paper is supposed to be based on one or more books or articles, review those texts. You don't need to re-read everything from beginning to end, but you will need to be able to summarize the authors' main ideas or arguments. Try using these sample sentences to articulate the authors' ideas:

The author believes _____ about _____ because _____.

The author shows us that _____ is true about _____ by presenting/describing/analyzing _____.

II. Pre-Writing

A. Underline each of the key words or phrases in the assignment. These could be people, places, things or ideas. Write something about each one. Work quickly, spilling out everything you know about that person, place, thing, or idea.

B. Imagine that your topic is the subject of a conversation among several people: you, the author(s) of your text(s), and an average, intelligent person. What do each of these participants say or assume about this topic? Whose analyses, descriptions, or opinions are similar to yours, and whose are different? Try using these sample sentences to articulate your answers:

Most people think/assume _____ about [my subject] because _____.
However, I think _____ because _____.

[One author] thinks _____ about [my subject], but [another author] believes _____ because _____. My position is _____ because _____.

C. Explain what is important or significant about your particular contribution to this conversation. Why is it important for your reader to consider what you have to say? What would happen if your position was widely read and accepted? What would happen if it wasn't?

III. Writing a Thesis Statement

A. In one or two sentences, summarize the main thing that you want to say in your paper. Try using these same sentences to get started. The part of the sentence that is underlined is the kernel of your thesis.

I want to persuade my readers that _____.

I want to describe/analyze _____ to show my readers.

I want to compare _____ with _____ to show my readers.

Examples:

I want to persuade my readers that children should not be allowed to vote.

I want to describe the love scenes in Romeo and Juliet to show my readers that Shakespeare had an ironic sense of humor.

I want to compare Crosby, Stills, Nash, and Young's music to Biggie Small's music to show my readers that music with a message is still relevant.

B. A good thesis statement says something that you believe, but that others might disagree with. Therefore, a thesis cannot be a sentence which simply states a fact.

Examples:

In today's society, children are not allowed to vote.
(States a fact; not a thesis)

Children should not be allowed to vote.
(States a position; thesis)

Check what you wrote in #1 above. Is it a statement of fact, or a thesis? Look at the part of the sentence that is underlined and ask yourself if someone else could potentially disagree with it.

C. Write your thesis statement so that it explains why you believe what you believe. Take the kernel of your thesis and add a clause beginning with "because."

Examples:

Thesis: Children should not be allowed to vote.

Better Thesis: Children should not be allowed to vote because they are not mature enough to handle the responsibility of voting.

D. Review what you wrote in exercise IIB. Then, try to write your thesis so that it shows how your thesis agrees or disagrees with other people's opinions on this topic.

Examples:

Better Thesis: Children should not be allowed to vote because they are not mature enough to handle the responsibility of voting.

Best Thesis: Although Vita Wallace argues forcefully for children's rights, I do not believe that children should be allowed to vote because they are not mature enough to handle the responsibility of voting.