

## Thesis Statements

### What is a thesis statement?

Your thesis statement is one of the most important parts of your paper. It expresses your main argument succinctly and explains why your argument is historically significant. Think of your thesis as a promise you make to your reader about what your paper will argue. Then, spend the rest of your paper—each body paragraph—fulfilling that promise.

Your thesis should be between 1 and 3 sentences long and is placed at the end of your introduction. Just because the thesis comes towards the beginning of your paper does not mean you can write it first and then forget about it. View your thesis as a work in progress while you write your paper. Once you are satisfied with the overall argument your paper makes, go back to your thesis and see if it captures what you have argued. If it does not, then revise it. Crafting a good thesis is one of the most challenging parts of the writing process, so do not expect to perfect it on the first few tries. Successful writers revise their thesis statements again and again.

### A successful thesis statement:

- makes a historical **argument**.
- takes a **position** that requires defending.
- is historically **specific**.
- is **focused** and **precise**.
- answers the question, “so what?”

### How to write a thesis statement:

Suppose you are taking an early American history class and your professor has distributed the following essay prompt:

“Historians have debated the American Revolution’s effect on women. Some argue that the Revolution had a positive effect because it increased women’s authority in the family. Others argue that it had a negative effect because it excluded women from politics. Still others argue that the Revolution changed very little for women, as they remained ensconced in the home. Write a paper in which you pose your own answer to the question of whether the American Revolution had a positive, negative, or limited effect on women.”

Using this prompt, we will look at both weak and strong thesis statements to see how successful thesis statements work.

**1. A successful thesis statement makes a historical argument.** It does not announce the topic of your paper or simply restate the paper prompt.

- **Weak Thesis:** The Revolution had little effect on women because they remained ensconced in the home.

While this thesis does take a position, it is problematic because it simply restates the prompt. It needs to be more specific about *how* the Revolution had a limited effect on women and *why* it mattered that women remained in the home.

- **Revised Thesis:** The Revolution wrought little political change in the lives of women because they did not gain the right to vote or run for office. Instead, women remained firmly in the home, just as they had before the war, making their day-to-day lives look much the same.

This revision is an improvement over the first attempt because it states what standards the writer is using to measure change (the right to vote and run for office) and it shows why women remaining in the home serves as evidence of limited change (because their day-to-day lives looked the same before and after the war). However, it still relies too heavily on the information given in the prompt, simply saying that women remained in the home. It needs to make an argument about some element of the war's limited effect on women. This thesis requires further revision.

- **Strong Thesis:** While the Revolution presented women unprecedented opportunities to participate in protest movements and manage their family's farms and businesses, it ultimately did not offer lasting political change, excluding women from the right to vote and serve in office.

This is a stronger thesis because it complicates the information in the prompt. The writer admits that the Revolution gave women important new opportunities, but argues that, in the end, it led to no substantial change. This thesis recognizes the complexity of the issue, conceding that the Revolution had both positive and negative effects for women, but that the latter outweighed the former. Remember that it will take several rounds of revision to craft a strong thesis, so keep revising until your thesis articulates a thoughtful and compelling argument.

**2. A successful thesis statement takes a position that requires defending.** Your argument should not be an obvious or irrefutable assertion. Rather, make a claim that requires supporting evidence.

- **Weak Thesis:** The Revolutionary War caused great upheaval in the lives of American women.

Few would argue with the idea that war brings upheaval. Your thesis needs to be debatable; it needs to make a claim against which someone could argue. Your job throughout the paper is to provide evidence in support of your own case. Here is a revised version:

- **Strong Thesis:** The Revolution caused particular upheaval in the lives of women. With men away at war, women took on full responsibility for running households, farms, and businesses. As a result of their increased involvement during the war, many women were reluctant to give up their new-found responsibilities after the fighting ended.

This is a stronger thesis because it says exactly what kind of upheaval the war wrought, and it makes a debatable claim. For example, a counterargument might be that most women were eager to return to the way life was before the war and thus did not try to usurp men's roles on the home front. Or, someone could argue that women were already active in running households,

farms, and businesses before the war, and thus the war did not mark a significant departure. Any compelling thesis will have counterarguments. Writers try to show that their arguments are stronger than the counterarguments that could be leveled against them.

**3. A successful thesis statement is historically specific.** It does not make a broad claim about “American society” or “humankind,” but is grounded in a particular historical moment.

- **Weak Thesis:** The Revolution had a negative impact on women because of the prevailing problem of sexism.

Sexism is a vague word that can mean different things in different times and places. In order to answer the question and make a compelling argument, this thesis needs to explain exactly *what* attitudes towards women were in early America, and *how* those attitudes negatively affected women in the Revolutionary period.

- **Strong Thesis:** The Revolution had a negative impact on women because of the belief that women lacked the rational faculties of men. In a nation that was to be guided by reasonable republican citizens, women were imagined to have no place in politics and were thus firmly relegated to the home.

This thesis is stronger because it narrows in on one particular and historically-specific attitude towards women: the assumption that women had less ability to reason than men. While such attitudes toward women have a long history, this thesis must locate it in a very specific historical moment, to show exactly how it worked in revolutionary America.

**4. A successful thesis statement is focused and precise.** You need to be able to support it within the bounds of your paper.

- **Weak Thesis:** The Revolution led to social, political, and economic change for women.

This thesis addresses too large of a topic for an undergraduate paper. The terms “social,” “political,” and “economic” are too broad and vague for the writer to analyze them thoroughly in a limited number of pages. The thesis might focus on one of those concepts, or it might narrow the emphasis to some specific features of social, political, and economic change.

- **Strong Thesis:** The Revolution paved the way for important political changes for women. As “Republican Mothers,” women contributed to the polity by raising future citizens and nurturing virtuous husbands. Consequently, women played a far more important role in the new nation’s politics than they had under British rule.

This thesis is stronger because it is more narrow, and thus allows the writer to offer more in-depth analysis. It states what kind of change women experienced (political), how they experienced that change (through Republican Motherhood), and what the effects were (indirect access to the polity of the new nation).

**5. A successful thesis statement answers the question, “so what?”** It explains to your reader why your argument is historically significant. It is not a list of ideas you will cover in your paper; it explains why your ideas matter.

- **Weak Thesis:** The Revolution had a positive effect on women because it ushered in improvements in female education, legal standing, and economic opportunity.

This thesis is off to a strong start, but it needs to go one step further by telling the reader *why* changes in these three areas mattered. How did the lives of women improve because of developments in education, law, and economics? What were women able to do with these advantages? Obviously the rest of the paper will answer these questions, but the thesis statement needs to give some indication of why these particular changes mattered.

- **Strong Thesis:** The Revolution had a positive impact on women because it ushered in improvements in female education, legal standing, and economic opportunity. Progress in these three areas gave women the tools they needed to carve out lives beyond the home, laying the foundation for the cohesive feminist movement that would emerge in the mid-nineteenth century.

This is a stronger thesis because it goes beyond offering a list of changes for women, suggesting why improvements in education, the law, and economics mattered. It outlines the historical significance of these changes: they helped women build a cohesive feminist movement in the nineteenth century.

### **Thesis Checklist**

When revising your thesis, check it against the following guidelines:

1. Does my thesis make a historical **argument**?
2. Does my thesis take a **position** that requires defending?
3. Is my thesis **historically specific**?
4. Is my thesis **focused** and **precise**?
5. Does my thesis answer the question, “so what?”?