

What Is a “Main Point”?

A main point is the writer’s point of view, perspective, opinion, or argument about its subject. The main point that writers make is commonly referred to as their **thesis statements**. Since the thesis statement is the writer’s central idea, everything in the body of the essay is there to explain the thesis, to support it, to explore its complexities, and to drive it home.

What Is a Good Main Point?

Some main points are better than others. Student writers often come up with stronger main points when they have a genuine sense of purpose, a reason why they want to convey something to their readers. A weaker main point is often too mechanical (the writer is often thinking only about completing the assignment because it’s required, not about what she or he genuinely thinks about the subject). Weaker main points are also often too general, trite or cliché (predictable and overused), or simplistic. Stronger main points are precise, well-defined, and acknowledge the complexity of the subject.

How Do I Come up with a Main Point?

Unless you’re given an assignment that asks you to write about a topic you’ve already given a lot of thought, it’s often hard to come up with a main point right away. Successful writers often write a fair amount to explore their ideas and to discover what they think about a subject without attempting to create a focused, structured draft, in order to come up with a tentative main point. Often, these writers will discover a possible main point at the end of their exploratory writing because the process of writing helps them figure out what they think.

Because student writers often write only one draft, the essays they turn in often are referred to as “discovery drafts” because the main point may indeed come at the very end, and as a result, is not developed sufficiently.

Once you have a tentative main point (and depending on the topic, getting to one can involve many pages of exploratory writing), you can try writing a structured draft that focuses on presenting that point. Through subsequent drafts, keep reconsidering whether the point you’re writing about is really the point you want to make (you may write your way into a better, more complex, more interesting one) and whether everything in the paper helps develop that point.

What Is a Thesis Statement?

To ensure that the readers “get” the essay’s main point, most writers state their thesis as directly as they can at some point in the essay (most commonly at the end of the introductory section). A thesis statement is one or more sentences that *sum up* the paper’s main point.

Sometimes a simple sentence can be the thesis statement:

By trying to save time, we often waste it.

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More often, a more elaborate statement is needed to cover what the writer is really trying to say:

The power that the media has over the general population is strong, influencing society's ideals and view of the "American Dream" through methods equivalent to brainwashing. The wealthy continue to uphold a destructive "American Dream," giving people a distorted perception of success and ignoring the reality of limited opportunity that exists today.

What Is a Thesis Statement Good For?

A thesis statement acts as a guide for the reader. It shapes the reader’s expectations of what to expect in the body of the paper. For example, the preceding example would lead close readers to expect the paper to go on to explain the following:

What the writer has experienced that leads her to believe Americans are worried about getting things done.

What rhythms the writer believes govern our lives and **Why**.

How these rhythms govern our lives.

What the writer has experienced that leads her to believe Americans’ worries about getting things done lead them to rarely understand these rhythms.

What is important about the fact that many Americans don’t understand these rhythms and **Why**.

A thesis statement also acts as a guide for you as the writer. It can help you know what you need to cover, when you’re “done,” and when you’re wandering off in the wrong direction.

How Do I Come up with a Thesis Statement?

Once you have a sense of the point you want to make, try summing up your point as concisely as you can in a sentence or a few sentences. This will probably take some effort. Then go on to write another draft in which you try to stick to and fully develop that thesis statement. Through subsequent drafts, as you continue to develop and refine your ideas, keep coming back to and reconsidering your tentative thesis statement. A tentative thesis statement needs to be continually reevaluated and revised over subsequent drafts as the paper’s main point becomes clearer and clearer to you. You probably won’t be able to settle on the final wording of your thesis statement until you’re finished working out what you want to say about your subject (and that can require many drafts).

DON’T bog down trying to write the “perfect” thesis statement as the first step in your writing process.

Length and Placement:

A thesis statement for a short paper is often (but not always) one sentence. It is often (but again, not always) placed at the end of an introductory paragraph. (The introduction serves to lead the reader up to your assertion of your main point, which the body of the paper then goes on to support.)

How Do I Recognize Whether My Tentative Thesis Statement Needs More Work?

When reconsidering your thesis statement, look out for the following problems:

A troublesome thesis statement is often worded very generally or imprecisely. The core problem may be that the writer doesn't yet really know what s/he wants to say and needs to further clarify her/his ideas. It's common for tentative thesis statements (the ones you write early on in your drafting process) to be generally or imprecisely worded because you're still clarifying your ideas. However, the final thesis statement needs to be *very* precisely worded.

A troublesome thesis statement can set up a topic that's too broad to be covered thoroughly in the number of pages you're planning to write. (Keep in mind that readers will expect you to go on to develop *all aspects* of your thesis statement.) A thesis statement that's too broad sets you up to write an essay that's too general, one that glosses over your ideas.

A troublesome thesis statement can also be too narrow; it may not make enough of a point about your subject. A thesis statement that's too narrow may sum up one aspect of a bigger subject the essay will cover but not the paper's overall point.

Sometimes student writers think a statement of common knowledge or fact is their thesis statement. Here the core problem is often that the writer hasn't yet figured out his or her *point of view, perspective, or opinion* on the subject. In order to **make a point** about a subject, you need to **take some kind of perspective on it**.

GENERAL & SPECIFIC INFORMATION

Each of the general statements below is followed by details, only some of which support the statement. Put a check mark by the relevant details and be prepared to explain your choices.
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General statement:

Alcoholics Anonymous and Gamblers Anonymous are effective because they give their members vital support in coping with difficult problems.

Detail

s:

People draw comfort from knowing that others have similar problems.

Alcoholism and compulsive gambling are diseases.

The "buddy system" is an essential part of such programs; each member has at least one other member to call on.

The group provides counseling to new members.

Members who backslide and take a drink aren't expelled from the group.

Gambling can ruin a person's family life just as drinking can.

Now there are dieters anonymous groups for larger-sized people and similar groups for child abusers.

General statement:

Many people become vegetarians because livestock are treated cruelly.

Detail s: Some people switch to a vegetarian diet after they suffer heart attacks and were told by their doctors to reduce their cholesterol intake.

Most of the chickens consumed in the U.S. are raised in "factories" in which they suffer terribly.

Not only do their extremely crowded cages cause so much stress that chickens frequently peck each other to death, but the cages also cause painful, bloody sores on their feet, often causing serious infections.

To combat the infections and protect his commodity, the farmer often injects the chickens with antibiotics, which usually only keep them alive, rather than cure the infection.

The diseased animals, pumped up with antibiotics and hormones, still end up in your grocer's freezer.

Cholesterol, which comes only from animal products, clogs arteries and causes arteriosclerosis.

Certain vegetarians from India don't eat root vegetables because harvesting them disturbs the environment and they continue to grow even after being harvested.

EXERCISE: Supply four supporting details for each of the following general statements.

Many financially-strapped college students soon discover the difficulties of renting houses together. For one thing, money constantly seems to cause problems.

And the close quarters can also result in friction between housemates, which often lead to arguments, especially when personalities clash.

I never knew how many inconsiderate people existed until I lived with housemates.

EXERCISE: Supply four supporting details for each of the following general statements.

When I decided to move to San Francisco, I had to weigh the pros and cons of having my dog in the city.

To succeed in school one must have self-discipline and be willing to do things that one may not want to.

Write one of your own generalizations and give four supporting points for it.