

Thesis and Essay

Essay relatively short literary composition in prose in which the writer discusses a topic or tries to persuade the reader to accept a point of view. Plutarch and Cicero, among classical authors, wrote essays, but the term was first used by Montaigne (1580) and Francis Bacon (1597), two of the greatest essayists. The informal essay is personal, conversational, relaxed, and frequently, humorous. Charles Lamb, William Hazlitt, and Mark Twain are among its masters. The formal essay, as written by Joseph Addison, Matthew Arnold, John Stuart Mill, Walter Pater, and others, is dogmatic, systematic, and expository. In the latter half of the twentieth century the two styles of essays have tended to converge in a genre that has become more diversified in subject and conversational in tone. The magazine has been a chief vehicle for the dissemination of contemporary essays.

—*The Concise Columbia Encyclopedia*, 3rd. ed. New York: Columbia UP and Houghton, 1994.

What follows here as an explanation of *thesis* is a combination of ideas from various texts, most notably John Gage's *The Shape of Reason: Argumentative Writing in College* (New York: Macmillan, 1987), Diana Hacker's *The Bedford Handbook for Writers*, 4th ed. (New York: Bedford-St. Martin's, 1994), and Sheridan Baker's *The Complete Stylist and Handbook* (New York: Crowell, 1976).

Thesis

An essay's thesis is a one-sentence statement of the main point of the essay, which the entire essay is trying to get across. The thesis is a statement of the writer's opinion; it is not a question, and it is not a statement of fact.

The thesis serves as the controlling idea of the entire composition; nothing appears in the composition which does not in some clear way support the thesis. The thesis directs the writer to keep the essay unified around one point about the topic.

The thesis provides the writer a purpose for writing; the thesis answers the reader's question "Why are you telling me all this?" before the reader can ask it. A thesis is an idea a writer has chosen to assert and argue for because the writer feels a sense of commitment to it and wants others to feel the same way. The thesis makes writing the essay seem worthwhile to the writer.

In a college essay, the thesis usually comes at the end of the introduction, which means it's usually the last sentence of the first or second paragraph (in *Writing 121*, the end of the first paragraph). In professional essays—the sort you find in *Harper's* or *Atlantic* or *The New Yorker* (and which eventually get reprinted in *Writing 121* textbooks)—a clear statement of thesis is often delayed until near the end of the essay, after a reader has been fed selected evidence so that the reader will more likely concur with the writer's point of view.

Checklist for a good thesis statement

1. Is it a statement of opinion, rather than fact?
2. Is it an arguable idea, one that can be developed by reasons?
3. Is it a complete, single declarative sentence?
4. Is it a response to a question at issue?
5. Should intelligent, informed people care about the issue? (Listen to the reader asking "So what?" after the thesis)
6. Does the thesis say exactly what I want my essay to conclude?
7. Are the keywords of the essay used precisely and clearly in the thesis?
8. Is the thesis narrowed down enough so the essay won't be a series of insupportable generalizations and stereotypes?
9. Is the thesis focused so that the reader knows exactly what will be included in the essay and what won't be?