

# THESIS STATEMENTS

## WHAT IS A THESIS?

- The thesis statement is one of the (if not the) most important parts of your paper.
- It should be introduced in the first paragraph and serve as the focus of your argument.
- Think of the thesis statement as a contract between you and the reader.
- The thesis makes certain promise to your reader; it then becomes your job to fulfill that promise using specific details and evidence from the text.
- Successful theses provoke thoughts, they read beautifully, they provide analysis of an idea or event, and they consider a *specific* issue or idea.

## THESIS 1:

### YOUR THESIS SHOULD INCLUDE THREE COMPONENTS: WHAT, HOW, AND WHY

**WHAT:** claim about an event/ any element of a story or historical topic.

**HOW:** the events, ideas, sources, and textual evidence that you choose to prove your claim.

**WHY:** the significance of your idea in terms of understanding the history/narrative as a whole (answers the dreaded “So What?” question).

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## THESIS 2:

YOUR THESIS SHOULD INCLUDE THE “ANALYTICAL THESIS STATEMENT PATTERN”

“**What**” you will analyze from the text (or documentary)

+

**Connecting powerful verb** (reveals, suggests, symbolizes, proves, demonstrates, conveys, portrays, insinuates, communicates, shows, etc.)

+

The “**Message**” revealed by your “What”

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## Some Problems with Thesis Statements

### The plot summary thesis:

The Confederate soldiers gave up their weapons after General Lee surrendered to General Grant.

### Proving the universal:

The U.S. Civil War was a conflict between the North and the South.

### The overly general thesis:

The U.S. Civil War demonstrated that war could be very bloody. [Note: if you can plug another subject/topic into your thesis, your thesis is probably too general.]

### The cliché thesis:

The U.S. Civil War proved that war is hell.

### The list thesis:

The death of civilians, the destruction of cities, and the devastation of countrysides showed the extent to which the U.S. Civil War severely damaged the entire nation. [Nothing technically “wrong” with this thesis, but it’s really boring! This is a great place to *start* with a thesis statement; then expand and/or finesse the what? how? and why? components.]

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The reader-response thesis (as an unhelpful way of dealing with the “so what?”):

Bell Irvin Wiley, in *The Life of Johnny Reb*, shows how the common soldier dealt with the war *to get the reader to understand* that the war was about more than politics and politicians. [All texts are addressed somehow to readers. This is not an analytical point.]

Successful thesis:

In both its geography and its brutality, the U.S. Civil War remains vastly different from other conflicts experience by Americans in the past three centuries. Specifically, the widespread impact of the war on the citizenry, the economy, and the landscape proves that the importance of the Civil War lies as much on the home front as it does on the battlefield.

**Why is it successful?**

- It's specific.
- It addresses a potential contradiction and is arguable.
- It provides a logical way to structure the argument.
- It's fairly daring intellectually and has an interesting “so what?”
- Can you identify the various components?