Thesis Statements

5 common problems
Today’s Agenda

- 5 Common problems with thesis statements
- Group work on thesis statements
4 Characteristics of an Effective Thesis Statement

● It states your topic and focus, which answer your research question

● It gives an overview of your supporting points, which are logically connected to your focus

● It gives enough information without too much detail

● It uses correct grammar and precise vocabulary
Research Question: Why do people become homeless?

Thesis Statement:
The lack of affordable housing, inadequate public assistance, and the breakdown of the family are *three causes of homelessness*. 

*Example: Strong Thesis Statement*
Characteristics of a Strong Thesis Statement

Structure, style, and vocabulary are three aspects of language to consider in writing a good thesis statement.

● Structure
● Style
● Vocabulary
Structure

- Structure: The topic, focus, and overview of support points can appear in any order in your thesis statement. We will look at an example.
Structure - Example

Topic: Vegetarianism

Focus: Reasons for becoming a vegetarian

Supporting Points: Health, ethics, and ecology

Possible Thesis Statements:

- Three reasons why people become vegetarians are health, ethics, and ecology.
- Health, ethics, and ecology are three reasons why people become vegetarians.
- People become vegetarians for three reasons: health, ethics, and ecology.
Style

Thesis statements are written in third person rather than first person. Phrases such as “I’m going to talk about” or “I think” are not appropriate in a thesis statement. We will look at two examples.
Inappropriate Language: I’m going to talk about two reasons why video games have a negative impact on children: isolation from other people and overexposure to violence.

Appropriate Language: Two reasons why video games have a negative impact on children are isolation from other people and overexposure to violence.
Because you need to include a lot of information in a thesis statement, precise vocabulary is essential. You can sometimes repeat carefully chosen vocabulary in a thesis statement throughout the research paper, providing an effective unifying thread. In particular, choosing appropriate words for the focus can help clarify and strengthen the thesis.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Focus</th>
<th>Vocabulary</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Cause</strong></td>
<td>reasons, influence lead to cause result in</td>
<td>Cultural values influence expectations of marriage in three ways: (list subtopics here).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Effect</strong></td>
<td>consequences, results outcomes, benefits, advantages/disadvantages</td>
<td>Inadequate transportation planning can have several negative consequences, including (list subtopics here).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Comparison</strong></td>
<td>differences/similarities X differs in these ways X is related to Y in these ways X has these points in common with Y</td>
<td>Attitudes towards marriage in the United States and Iran differ in four ways: (list subtopics here).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Definition</strong></td>
<td>characteristics, components, qualities, traits</td>
<td>Two qualities of a successful city are strong schools and diverse economic opportunities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Classification</strong></td>
<td>types, categories</td>
<td>Heroes can be divided into two categories: personal and public.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Process</strong></td>
<td>steps, stages, phases</td>
<td>The change in men’s role in the family during the past fifty years has occurred in four distinct ways: (list subtopics here).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Argument</strong></td>
<td>reasons positive/negative helpful, harmful</td>
<td>Two reasons why standardized testing is a good idea are to increase student motivation and to measure school performance.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
5 Common Problems with Thesis Statements

1. Lack of Focus
2. Lack of Supporting Points
3. Confusing Supporting Points
4. Too much Information
5. Inappropriate Language
5 Common problems with Thesis Statements

Problem 1: Lack of Focus

Weak Thesis Statement: The U.S. has a lot of crime.

This statement does not tell whether the paper will discuss the causes of crime or its effects; contrast the amount of crime now compared with ten years ago; argue in support of certain ways to reduce crime; or present some other ideas. To improve this thesis, the writer must include a focus. Here are two possible ways to revise the thesis statement to include a focus:
Stronger Thesis Statements (one with focus and cause and one with focus on comparison)

- Crime today is more widespread among many economic groups, more violent, and more costly to society than it was ten years ago.
- The rising crime rate in the United States has caused a loss of talented young people to crime, high government costs for law enforcement, and a drop in tourism.
Problem 2: Lack of supporting points

Weak Thesis Statement: Three types of crime have been increasing in the U.S.

By briefly describing as supporting points the types of crimes that have increased, the writer can have a more effective thesis statement that tells the reader what kinds of crime she will be discussing.
Stronger Thesis Statement

- Three types of crime have been increasing in U.S. cities: personal assault, car robbery, and home burglary.

The new thesis tells us that the first part of the paper will be about increases in personal assault; the second section, increases in car robberies; and the third, increases in burglaries of homes.
Problem 3: Confusing Supporting Points

Some thesis statements have supporting points that are not logically connected to the focus of the thesis. We will look at an example.
Weak Thesis Statement

- Many factors influence hunting behavior of sharks: the type of shark, its age and strength, its migration patterns, people’s misunderstandings about sharks’ hunting behavior, and the current overfishing of sharks.

  - The focus of the research paper is “factors [that] influence the hunting behavior of sharks,” or causes of sharks’ behavior while hunting. The following are the supporting points:
    - The type of shark
    - A shark’s age and strength
    - Migration patterns
    - People's misunderstandings about sharks
    - Overfishing of sharks

Notice that while the first 3 points support the focus by explaining the causes of the sharks’ behavior, the last 2 do not. A better thesis statement would only include the supporting points related to the focus of causes for sharks’ hunting behavior.
Stronger Thesis Statement

Many factors influence the hunting behavior of sharks: the type of shark, the age and strength of the shark, and the shark’s migration pattern.
Problem 4: Too much information

Weak Thesis Statement:

Although some people argue that voting should be mandatory because it is a civic duty, it would increase voter turnout among poor people, and it would cause politicians to consider the needs of every citizen, compulsory voting is not a good idea because it is every citizen’s right to choose to vote or not, it would not be feasible to enforce mandatory voting, and people who are forced to vote may not vote carefully.

This thesis statement is too long. These details are more appropriate as supporting information in the body of the paper. This thesis statement would be more effective if some of the ideas were condensed.
Stronger Thesis Statement

Although some people argue that voting should be mandatory, there are three reasons why it should not, including violation of citizens’ rights, lack of feasibility, and hindrances to careful voting.
Problem 5: Inappropriate language

Weak Thesis Statement:

In this paper, I will write about why I support capital punishment and what people on the other side have to say about it.

This thesis statement includes the opinion of the writer directly with the words “why I support.” A more appropriate thesis statement for an academic paper indicates your opinion indirectly, without using “I.”
Although some people disagree with capital punishment, it is necessary for three main reasons: making people aware of the seriousness of crime, protecting society from criminals, and reducing crime.

The use of “it is necessary” tells the reader that the writer thinks capital punishment is essential. The inclusion of the phrase “although some people disagree” shows that she will also explain some of the reasons others disagree with capital punishment.
Example from activity 1 - Number 1

I believe assisted suicide causes two main problems: difficulty in regulating it and difficulty for parents in making a rational choice.

Inappropriate language
Although our memory of John F. Kennedy has been frozen, he is remembered for many reasons: his political achievements, the way his public behavior reflected American values, and the mystery of his assassination.
Answers from Activity 1

1. *Problem:* inappropriate language

2. *Problem:* focus unclear and no supporting points

3. *Problem:* more information than necessary

4. *Problem:* focus unclear and no supporting points

5. *Problem:* Supporting point 3 not logically connected to focus – it is a cause, not a result.
1. **Topic**: John F. Kennedy  
   **Focus**: remembered for many reasons  
   **Supporting points**: political achievements, American values, assassination

2. **Topic**: Bruce Lee  
   **Focus**: make [him] extraordinary  
   **Supporting points**: his dramatic life, his skill as a martial artist, his philosophy of life

3. **Topic**: children … commit violence  
   **Two focuses**: 1) factors that motivate 2) ways to prevent  
   **Supporting points**: family problems, media violence, support for parents, monitoring of media

4. **Topic**: Japanese art  
   **Focus**: traditional characteristics  
   **Supporting points**: simplicity, emptiness, directness, naturalness

5. **Topic**: why people smoke  
   **Focus**: reasons  
   **Supporting points**: social pressure, psychological need, and physical addiction