

Thesis Statements

1. A short essay should contain a thesis statement in its first paragraph. The thesis statement should let the reader know, as soon as possible, what argument the paper will make.
2. The thesis statement should be brief; there is no point in supplying an outline or summary of everything that a short paper will say.
3. But the thesis statement should not merely announce the author's general interests or plans:

I intend to discuss the reasons for the fall of Rome.

This specifies a topic, but it does not specify what point the author intends to make about it. It tells the reader little, especially if the title of the essay is "Reasons for the Fall of Rome." Make the thesis statement a definite assertion of your views:

The major reason for the fall of Rome was bad economic policy.

The thesis statement should present a precise claim that you can later support with specific evidence from the texts you are studying.

4. A good thesis statement has these characteristics:

- A) It is clearly and forcefully supported by the rest of the paper; it isn't just a springboard that allows the writer to jump into topics having little to do with the "thesis."
- B) It is precise. It is not something that one has trouble understanding until one reads the rest of the paper, and it is not something so general, or so "safe," that it fails to represent any strong position. "Bad economic policy was one aspect of the fall of Rome" is not a very precise statement.
- C) It is something worth arguing about. There is no point in basing a paper on a thesis statement that is obvious to everyone or that is not concerned with any very significant issue. Read your thesis statement and ask yourself, "So what?"

5. A thesis statement may sometimes require more than one sentence to make, and it may appear in the beginning, middle, or end of the first paragraph. In order to decide where to place the thesis statement, think carefully about your readers. Assume that they are people like you: they have read the books that you have read; they have attended the lectures that you have attended. You don't need to write as if your subject were entirely unknown to them. Still, they may not have considered your subject as thoroughly as you have while planning your paper. Is there anything that would be useful for them to read before they arrive at your thesis statement?

There is no shortage of "explanations" for the fall of the Roman Empire. Religious fanaticism, the decline of urban institutions, the growth of an autonomous military caste, the decay of political and even of sexual morality-- each of these has been proclaimed the chief cause of Rome's destruction. In fact, however, the major reason for the fall of Rome was bad economic policy.

The first two sentences provide some reason for paying attention to the thesis statement: not everyone knows why Rome fell (although the subject is apparently interesting enough to make almost everyone want to know), but the author does, and he or she is about to explain it all.

6. Now, is there anything your readers ought to know before you proceed from your thesis statement to the supporting arguments that will occupy the rest of the paper? If so, you may want to include additional information at the end of your first paragraph, right after your thesis statement:

In fact, however, the major reason for the fall of Rome was bad economic policy. Both ancient history and modern economic theory support this view.

The reader is thus prepared for the arguments to follow by being informed of the type of evidence that will be used. Nevertheless, it is important to realize that not every thesis statement needs to be surrounded (cushioned?) by other statements preceding and following it. Get to your arguments as soon as possible. If your five-page paper is intended to explain the fall of Rome, you will have to move especially fast.

7. Here are two final suggestions. First: wait to do most of the work on your first paragraph until after you have already written a rough draft of the rest of the paper; in that way you can make sure that the first paragraph really fits the paper it introduces. Second: don't try to get your first paragraph going with a gust of hot air, thus:

Since the beginning of time, man has wondered why societies decline and fall.

What does such a statement tell readers that they need to know? Nothing. If the subject is Rome, start with Rome, and not with the beginning of time.