

Writing Handout 1: Title, Thesis Statement and Claim Sentences

Titles

Your paper should always have a title. The title should function as a statement of the chief topic of your paper, giving the reader an idea of what the paper is going to be about. Do not use vague titles, or titles that promise far more than the paper can deliver (e.g. “Modern Painting,” “The Art of the Nineteenth Century,” or worse, “Second Paper.”)

Thesis Statement

The single feature of a paper that most contributes to its clarity is the thesis statement. A thesis statement is a very condensed expression of your whole argument.

Qualities of a Well-Written Thesis Statement

- **Significant:** In order to be considered “significant,” a thesis must not be so obvious that it requires no argument to support it. The thesis, “Paul Cezanne was a French painter,” is not significant because it is indisputable. A thesis must be disputable.
- **Appropriately Located:** The thesis should appear at or near the end of the introductory paragraph. (In a short paper, this usually means at the end of the first paragraph.) The purpose of a thesis is to control the way the reader reads the rest of your paper. By stating your thesis at the beginning you make it much more difficult for the reader to read whatever they like into your paper.
- **Clear, specific, and detailed:** If the thesis is vague or awkwardly expressed, your readers will enter the paper without having been told what they should see. This will have two consequences:
 - (a) They will see whatever they are predisposed to see.
 - (b) They will experience the paper as “unclear.”

The thesis statement should be the sentence you take most time and trouble to write.

The more detailed your thesis statement is, the less opportunity you provide your reader to see something else in the evidence than what you want them to see. The thesis should take the form of one long, rich sentence that summarizes the whole of what you want the reader to believe after they have read your paper.

- **Not Topic-Announcing:** A thesis should never be topic announcing. A topic-announcing thesis is one of the following sort: “In this paper we are going to discuss a painting by Kandinsky.” This thesis is topic announcing because it tells the reader that you are going to tell them something *without telling them what that something is*.

A better thesis would state: “In his painting *Improvisation X*, Kandinsky conveys a sense of agitation through his use of jagged line, strongly contrasting colors, and a compressed, almost claustrophobic spatial construction.”

A good thesis actually *states what the argument is; it does not just state that an argument concerning a particular topic will, in the course of time, be presented.*

Claim Sentences

The second most important tool in creating a paper that is “clear” to a reader is the claim sentence. The claim sentence is a sentence that states the point of a paragraph. It is to the paragraph what the thesis is to the paper as a whole. It controls the way the reader reads the rest of the information in the paragraph. A paper will seem “clear” to the reader to the extent that paragraphs have appropriate claim sentences and unclear to the extent that they do not.

Claim sentences have two functions:

1. To sum up the point the paragraph is making.
2. To tie the paragraph back to the thesis of the paper.

If your claim sentence does not do both then it is inadequate.

- Like a thesis statement, a claim sentence should be appropriately located. A claim sentence is most effective when it is the first sentence of a paragraph.
- Just as a thesis should not be topic announcing, so a claim sentence should not merely announce the topic of a paragraph:

Bad claim sentence: “In *The Night Cafe*, Van Gogh makes great use of color.”

Good claim sentence: “In *The Night Cafe*, Van Gogh uses intense, saturated, and strongly contrasting colors to heighten the effect of psychological tension in his painting.”

- The rest of the paragraph should do two things:
 - (a) Explain in more detail what you mean by the claim sentence.
 - (b) Give evidence for the claim. Here you would use your specific observations of the images you are discussing; you might use quotations; or you might refer to another author’s argument.
- It is vital that material which has nothing to do with your claim should not appear in your paragraph. If it does, it will confuse your reader and will make your paragraph less clear and coherent.

If the misplaced material is important then it should have a paragraph of its own. If it is not important, cut it.

- Never give the reader evidence (for instance, a quotation) until you have told them how to interpret it. Readers will always assume that the sentences which precede a quotation state a claim that the quotation is intended to support.

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