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Thesis Statements

Thesis statements are the central claim of your argument or paper. It is important to understand the difference between a topic and a thesis statement. A **Topic** is a general (often broad) subject or idea you want to discuss or explore. A **Thesis Statement** is a specific argument you will be making about a specific subject. For example, the death penalty is a topic. A thesis statement presents a specific stance or argument about a topic.

A thesis statement about this topic could be “The use of the death penalty as punishment for minor defendants is wrong because it violates the ‘cruel and unusual punishment’ clause of the Eighth Amendment of the US Constitution.” It may help to think of a thesis statement as a guide to your paper for the reader. A solid thesis statement states your point of view and sets up your argument in a concise, specific, and interesting way. It also directly answers the question in the assignment and you can always develop a counter argument against it.

Writing a Thesis Statement

The first step to writing a good thesis statement is making sure you understand the assignment. For instance, a thesis statement about a close reading of a text may be very different from a thesis statement for a research paper.

A thesis statement for a close reading of a text would set up an argument about a particular interpretation of a text. An example of this could be “The father/son dynamic Ulysses sets up in lines 33-43 of Alfred Tennyson’s “Ulysses” is crucial to understanding the poem as a whole because Ulysses inadvertently gives the reader an idea of his priorities in life by describing his son’s life in contrast to his own.”

A thesis statement for a research paper would directly answer the question in the assignment while setting up your argument for a specific interpretation of the research. For example, if your assignment was to research the impacts of poverty in third world countries and discuss the most significant impact poverty has on these countries, an example of a good thesis statement could be “Widespread poverty in third world countries affects the future of these countries because children growing up in poverty are often permanently disadvantaged as result of hunger, malnutrition, lack of access to safe water, poor health, and the lack of educational and other resources.”

If you have any questions, or just want to confirm that you are headed in the right direction for your assignment, talk to your instructor. Once you understand the assignment, you are ready to get started!

Getting Started

This is often the hardest part of constructing a thesis statement! One way to get started is to brainstorm. You have an idea or an assigned topic to work with, so you can ask yourself some questions to start the brainstorming process. What do you think about the topic? What opinions or arguments do you have about the topic? How can you support your ideas and arguments? Do

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you have solid examples and facts to support your claim(s)? It may help to write down all your answers to these questions. Now you are ready to start forming and refining your thesis statement. Let's assume your assignment is to construct a response to the use of the death penalty in cases involving minor defendants.

You may write something like "The death penalty is sometimes used as punishment in cases involving minor defendants."

This statement could be used as a starting point, but it essentially just restates the assignment. It does not include your opinion or argument. The next step is to refine your idea and construct your thesis, incorporating your specific stance or argument.

Refining Your Idea

It may help to construct a sentence about your opinion on the topic. You can start by writing a sentence using the model "I think that _____."

Fill in the blank with the opinion you formed during the brainstorming process. Let's assume that, after completing all your research, you come to the conclusion that the use of the death penalty as punishment for minors is wrong. Now you have a rough idea of your opinion and what you want to argue. The next step is to express the *why* behind your opinion using the following model:

"I think that the use of the death penalty as punishment for minor defendants is wrong because _____."

Fill in the blank with *why* you think the death penalty should not be used in cases involving minors. Your sentence may read something like "I think the use of the death penalty as punishment for minor defendants is wrong because it violates the 'cruel and unusual punishment' clause of the Eighth Amendment of the US Constitution."

Now you have a solid idea and argument to use as the base for your thesis statement! The next step is to refine your idea by removing yourself from the previous statement. The goal is to make your final thesis statement in the form of a central claim.

Refining Your Thesis

The first step is to get rid of the "I" in your thesis statement to make it sound more academic and less like a personal opinion. You want to boil down your thesis statement down to your central claim to make it as concise as possible. To do this, all you have to do is remove the "I think" from your sentence: "The use of the death penalty as punishment for minor defendants is wrong because it violates the 'cruel and unusual punishment' clause of the Eighth Amendment of the US Constitution."

Congratulations! You now have the tools you need write a great thesis statement!