Developing a Thesis

Anyone who has used a roadmap before understands that it can be an invaluable tool for navigating unfamiliar territory. It provides a guide to follow while looking for your ultimate destination, and can help you understand what to look for along the way. Much like a roadmap, a thesis statement serves as an overview of the journey the paper will take to answer the prompt.

What is a thesis statement?
A thesis statement is a sentence wherein the writer answers the prompt directly. It should present your stance on the subject to the reader, and provide them with an idea of what to expect from the rest of the paper. It is usually located at the end of the first paragraph of a paper.

Analyzing the prompt
Before attempting to write a thesis statement, it is important to determine what the prompt is asking. One way to do this is to look for key words and phrases that indicate what is expected out of the paper, and to make a list out of them, to determine what needs to be included.

John Steinbeck’s novel, “The Grapes of Wrath,” contains many references to nature. Depictions of grass, soil, and crops are mentioned a variety of times throughout the story. How are the depictions of land framed, and what do they reveal about Steinbeck’s opinion about its destruction?

In this prompt, some key phrases include ‘how,’ ‘depictions of land,’ ‘framed,’ ‘reveal about Steinbeck’s opinion’ and ‘destruction.’ This means that the thesis statement needs to state how the descriptions of land are framed, as well as Steinbeck’s opinion regarding its destruction.

Taking a stance
In order to write a thesis statement, you need to write a statement which can be argued against. This means that you must have an opinion regarding the question provided. In the case of the previous example, this means that the writer needs to take a stance in regards to what Steinbeck’s opinion was regarding the destruction of the land, along with which devices back up that opinion.

Incorrect: John Steinbeck had an opinion about infertile land which he demonstrated in his book.

This is not a proper thesis statement because it does not give the reader an opinion as to what Steinbeck’s opinion was about the destruction of the land, or provide any idea of how the book showed what that opinion was.

Correct: John Steinbeck holds the opinion that the destruction of the land via industrialization is betraying the interconnectedness of humans, as demonstrated by his framing of the people who destroy a foreclosed farm as being a part of a monster, his framing of people that abuse migrant workers as immoral, and his continued descriptions of the land as a sacred being that is being violated.
This is a proper thesis statement. It takes a definitive stance as to what Steinbeck’s opinion was regarding the destruction of the land (It “betray[s] the interconnectedness of humans.”). This statement can be argued against or used as a basis for discussion. The thesis statement also specifies how Steinbeck frames the descriptions of the land.

**Using the Thesis as a Roadmap**

In order for the thesis to function as a guide to the rest of the paper, it should give the reader a general idea of what to expect. One way to do this would be to take the topic sentence for each paragraph, shorten it to a key concept, and include it as part of a list of concepts in the thesis. (In the previous example, this would be the phrases that begin, “his framing of the people that destroy a farm…his framing of people that abuse migrant workers…his continued descriptions of the land as a sacred being that is being violated.”)

If the topic sentences have not already been written, determine what main arguments your paper will center around (these will be the individual ideas that each take up one paragraph) and provide a brief summary of them in the thesis statement. This is done in order to give the reader an idea of the direction the paper will take to prove their answer to the question.

It is also possible for a thesis statement to take a stance and provide a general idea of what the paper will be about without specifying what the topics of each paragraph will be in a list form.

> John Steinbeck frames the destruction of land as the victim of a violent assault, typically via characterizations of the actors in its destruction, demonstrating that he feels the land itself is sacred, and should not be disturbed.

This is another example of a correct thesis statement. It addresses both aspects of the question (how the land is framed and what his opinion is about its destruction) in a direct way, and aptly summarizes what will be discussed in the paper without using a three-pronged format.

**Breaking out of the Thesis mold**

There are many old-fashioned ideas around what a thesis needs to look like. Some examples of these ideas include:

- Thesis statements are always one sentence long.
- They must always be three-pronged, to show what will happen in the paragraphs.
- Thesis statements need to be written before anything else.
- Thesis statements always have to come at the end of the first paragraph.*
- The thesis must summarize the whole essay.

While there is nothing wrong with thesis statements following any of the conventions listed, thesis statements do not have to fit those parameters.

**Key Points and Guidelines**

- The thesis statement should take a stance (e.g. it can be argued against).
- It should answer the question posed by the prompt.
- It should not state the obvious.

*If your professor has specified that the thesis statement must be at the end of the first paragraph, do not place it elsewhere.

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• The statement should be a preview of what to expect throughout the paper.

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