

## **FIVE MINUTES ON.... THESIS STATEMENTS.**

### **What is a thesis statement anyway?**

Think of it as a statement of the **main over-arching point** that you want to make in your research paper as a result of what you have found out in the course of your research.

It helps to think of why you were doing “research” in the first place: there was something you wanted to know that you didn’t know. In other words, you had a “**research question**”. Sometimes your prof will give you this question. Sometimes you will be asked to come up with your own.

### **Such as?**

For example, you might, in an English paper, be asking why in Shakespeare’s play *Hamlet* *delays* his revenge on his uncle for the death of his father. Or in a more political-type paper, maybe in Politics, or even in ENGL 115, you might be asking (say), why did Canada get involved in the war in Afghanistan?

### **And then what do I do?**

In the case of the Shakespeare question, you would then read the relevant parts of the play (again) perhaps, copy down what seem to you to be useful quotations.

You then should probably read what some other critics have said on this much-analysed topic, in academic journal articles or books. There will be a variety of issues raised. You could note down a couple of the positions of these critics to help you situate your own approach in the existing scholarship. As you read you might find yourself interested in the discussions around the notion of “uncertainty”: the status of Hamlet’s knowledge/lack of knowledge about his father’s death. You might even then, in a more sophisticated paper, consider what we mean by *knowing*, so that you might have a look at what philosophers and literary theorists, have said about knowledge, certainty and uncertainty. You would probably go back to the play to read parts again in the light of your new-found knowledge, and copy down what seem relevant parts to quote.

### **And...?**

At the end of your research process you might have decided that, from the evidence you have accumulated, the best explanation for Hamlet’s delay lies in the fact that he is unable to determine what forms a reasonable level of certainty about what happened at these events in the past, at which he was not present. He thinks his uncle is guilty, and wants to exact revenge, but at the same time he is not certain, and not sure how to act as a result.

You have now answered your research question: that is, you have a *thesis*, in that you have taken *an arguable position with regard to a worthwhile issue*. This will guide your writing process, BUT it may shift a little as a result of that process, which is often not a simple transcription of pre-existing ideas from your head, but part of the way those initial ideas are clarified.

**OK – but I’m still not sure what a thesis *statement* is...**

All that remains now is to form that idea, that answer to your research question, into a **clear *statement*: a sentence or two (often profs prefer ONE) that explains your argument, or *thesis***. Conventionally you will place this at **the end of your introduction** so that your reader knows how to read what is coming. In terms of the chronology of your writing process, the honed thesis statement *might* be the very last thing that you write.

**Can you give me an example?**

How about this:

Hamlet’s inability to act in pursuit of revenge against Claudius arises from his requirement for proof of guilt, which takes him out of the realm of emotional certainty and into the realm of interpretation and uncertainty: he cannot act because he cannot *know* what happened.

Or in the case of the political question:

Canada was bound by its treaty obligations to its NATO partner to support the Afghanistan operation; however, the decision to take on responsibility for the troubled Khandahar province was a mistake, driven more by the military’s ambition to prove itself in a “real” war than by Canada’s national interest.

In both cases there are alternative viewpoints. A strong essay will take on **/try to deal with those alternatives, those counter-arguments**, to show why you hold the position that you do, rather than those other positions. Like Hamlet himself, though, we are never going to get to the absolute bottom of questions like these. Hamlet’s motivation has been discussed for 400 years, and will go on being discussed as long as the play is read. You are making an argument, an attempt at answering these important questions. Your essay is just one statement in what you can think of as a great academic debate. You’ve listened to what scholars said before you, then you had your say. Other scholars might read what you have written and have their ideas affected. They might come back with a response that deals with an aspect that you failed to deal with. No one gets the last word.

The word “essay” derives from the French verb “essayer”: to try, to make an attempt. In the end that is all that you have to do, all you *can* do. Take courage from this, and venture forth, *try*; get interested in your own work, and maybe your reader (your prof) will be interested too.

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