#1) Thesis Statements and Essay Maps

The thesis statement announces the main point or controlling idea of your essay. This handout identifies qualities of good thesis statements and describes some common errors to avoid. The handout is based on persuasive or argumentative essay writing.

A. Qualities of a Good Thesis Statement

1. **A good thesis states the writer's clearly defined opinion on some subject.**
   Indicate your position. Don't talk around the issue. State your view clearly and precisely.

   **Poor:** Many people have different opinions on whether people under twenty-one should be able to drink alcohol, and I agree with some of them. [Writer takes no clear position.]

   **Poor:** The question of whether we need a national law governing the minimum age to drink alcohol is a controversial issue in many states. [Writer merely states the issue is controversial.]

   **Better:** A federal law establishing a minimum legal age to drink alcohol is needed to help coordinate national campaigns promoting safe drinking and to prevent minors from crossing state lines to obtain beverages illegal in their home states. [Writer takes a clear position on the issue.]

2. **A good thesis has something worthwhile to say.**

   **Poor:** The four children in my family have completely different personalities. [This statement may be true, but would anyone but your parents be interested with this assertion?]

   **Better:** Family upbringing has less of an impact on variation in sibling traits of personality than do factors such as peer influence and other environmental variables.

3. **A good thesis is limited to fit the assignment.**
   Don't allow your thesis to promise more of a discussion than you can adequately deliver in a short essay.

   **Poor:** Black artists have contributed a lot to American culture. ["Black artists," "culture," and "contributed a lot" cover more ground than can be dealt with in one essay.]

   **Better:** Scott Joplin was a major influence in the development of the uniquely American music called ragtime. [Makes assertion regarding influence of one artist on one art form.]

4. **A good thesis is located in the first or second paragraph and is supported by an essay map.**

Many thesis sentences will benefit from the addition of an essay map, a brief statement in the introductory paragraph introducing the major supporting points to be discussed. Let's suppose you have been assigned
the task of praising or criticizing some aspect of your campus. You decide that your thesis will be "The campus bookstore is the best place in town to buy textbooks." Although your thesis does take a stand ("best place"), your reader will not know why the bookstore is so good or how you will support your argument. With an essay map added, the reader will have a brief but specific idea where the essay is going and how it will be developed. Consider the following thesis statements and essay maps, which are underlined.

The campus bookstore is the best place in town to buy textbooks. The reasonable prices, knowledgeable employees, and well-stocked shelves create loyal customers.

Sometimes you can include the essay map in the thesis sentence:

Reasonable prices, knowledgeable employees, and well-stocked shelves make the campus bookstore the best place in town to buy textbooks.

B. Avoiding Common Errors in Thesis Statements

1. Do more than announce your topic; state your position on the issue.

   Poor: The subject of this paper is the soda tax controversy. [Announcement of topic, not a thesis.]
   Poor: I'm going to discuss soda taxes. [Statement of intention, not a thesis.]
   Better: Soda taxes will not help to solve health or budget issues. [The writer states an opinion.]
   Better: Legislative proposals for soda taxes, intended to curb obesity and raise revenues to reduce debt, will accomplish neither goal, as consumers will switch to unhealthy alternatives and governments will spend the "sin taxes" raised. [The writer states an opinion and forecasts the support to be provided in the essay.]

2. Don't add wordy tags: "in my opinion," "I believe," or "in this essay I'll argue that . . . ." Be direct.

   Poor: My opinion is that the federal government should provide additional funding for solar energy research.
   Poor: My thesis states that the federal government should provide additional funding for solar energy research.
   Better: The federal government should provide additional funding for solar energy research.
   Poor: In this essay I will give you lots of reasons why horse racing should not be legalized in Texas.
   Better: Horse racing should not be legalized in Texas.

3. Don't be unreasonable, bombastic, or irrational. Making feverish claims will not persuade your reader.

   Poor: Radical religious fanatics across the nation are trying to impose their wingnut views by censoring high school library books. [Words such as "radical," "fanatics," and "wingnut," will antagonize many readers immediately.]
   Better: Only elected local school board members, not religious leaders or community members with extreme views, should decide which books are ordered by high school libraries.
Poor: Too many corrupt books in our high school libraries, selected by fascist and atheistic educators, are undermining the morals or our youth. [Again, readers will tune out a hotheaded name-caller.]

Better: In order to ensure that high school libraries contain books that reflect community standards, parents should have a voice in selecting new titles.

4. Don't present an inarguable fact as a thesis statement. A thesis is an assertion of opinion that leads to discussion and debate. Don't assert an idea that is self-evident or dead-ended.

Poor: Child abuse is a terrible problem in our country. [Yes, of course! Who wouldn't agree that child abuse is terrible?]

Better: In order to reduce child abuse, the legislature must mandate tougher sentencing guidelines for repeat offenders. [This thesis will lead to a discussion in which supporting arguments and evidence will be presented.]

Poor: Advertisers often use sex in their ads to sell products. [True. But how could this essay be more than a description of one ad after another?]

Better: Many liquor advertisers, known for using risqué photos of women to promote their products, are now delivering subliminal sexual images to viewers. [This claim is controversial and will require persuasive supporting evidence.]

Better: Although long criticized for their sexist portrayal of women in television commercials, the auto industry is just as often guilty of stereotyping men as brainless fools incapable of making a decision. [This thesis makes a claim that may lead to a lively debate.]

5. Avoid expressing your thesis in the form of a question. A thesis should be an assertion.

Poor: Why should every college student have to take two years of foreign language?
Better: Math majors should be exempt from the foreign language requirement.

As you draft and revise, you may discover that your perspective or position on the topic changes in some way. Remember, writing can be an act of discovery, of drawing our thoughts and ideas into clearer focus. So don't consider the thesis statement you begin with as an idea carved in stone. While working through the stages of the writing process, think of the initial thesis statement you craft as preliminary. You can always return to your introduction and revise your thesis.

(adapted from Jean Wyrick's Steps to Writing Well, 2nd ed., published by Harcourt Brace)