APUSH Writing Tips: Thesis Statements

**I. What is a thesis statement? Here are several definitions/descriptions:**

* A thesis statement is the position a student is going to take, the argument that is going to be made; it is therefore the answer to the question being asked.
* Every paper you write should have a main point, a main idea, or central message. The arguments you make in your paper should reflect this main idea. The sentences that capture your position on this main idea are what we call a thesis statement.
* What you plan to argue + How you plan to argue it = Thesis
* One- or two-sentence condensation of the argument or analysis that is to follow.
* The central argument of your essay and the road map to the argument you will subsequently develop in your essay
* The thesis statement is not a fact; it is an informed interpretation of the facts. Neither is the thesis just an opinion. Instead, the thesis is the reasoned judgment of the student.

**II. Questions to Ask When Formulating Your Thesis:**

**1. Does your thesis take a position on the issue at hand—i.e., does it ATQ (answer the question)?**

The thesis statement should do more than merely announce the topic; it must reveal what position you will take in relation to that topic, how you plan to answer the prompt and analyze/evaluate the subject or the issue. In short, instead of merely stating a general fact or resorting to a simplistic pro/con statement, you must decide what it is you have to say.

**Tips**:

* **Avoid merely restating the prompt**; your answer and specific supporting arguments should be clear. In this way you will tell your reader why your take on the issue matters.
  + **Original [weak] thesis**: In this paper, I will discuss the relationship between fairy tales and early childhood.
  + **Revised [stronger] thesis**: Not just empty stories for kids, fairy tales shed light on the psychology of young children.
* **Avoid merely reporting a fact.** Say more than what is already proven fact. Go further with your ideas. Otherwise… why would your point matter?
  + **Original [weak] thesis**: Hoover's administration was rocked by scandal.
  + **Revised [stronger] thesis**: The many scandals of Hoover's administration revealed basic problems with the Republican Party's nominating process.
* **A good thesis may acknowledge the opposing argument.** A good thesis allows the writer to show understanding of the complexity of the issue and knowledge of information on both sides of the issue. Most of the essay questions allow for an opinion on either side of the question. By acknowledging another view in the thesis, it becomes possible to add relevant information on that side of the issue. For example:

Prompt: **“**Thomas Jefferson is often thought of as an idealist, but as president, he demonstrated his conviction as a pragmatist.” Assess the accuracy of this statement.

**Although** Jefferson was idealistic in his insistence on an embargo that cut off trade to Europe, he showed himself to be predominantly a pragmatist in the way he handled the Louisiana Purchase, the issue of the constitutionality of the National Bank, and Federalist appointees.

**OR**

**Despite** his pragmatic decision to purchase Louisiana, Jefferson proved himself to be primarily an idealist through his handling of the Embargo Act and the national debt.

**2. Where is your thesis statement?**

You should provide a thesis early in your essay – at the end of the introductory paragraph -- in order to establish your position and give your reader a sense of direction.

**3. Is your thesis statement specific, or too general?**

A well-written thesis statement must be narrow enough to limit the writer to something that can be addressed in about thirty minutes but not so narrow as to prevent them from writing relevant things that help answer the question or that ignore big evidence.

A thesis that is too broad will cause the student to briefly mention a wide variety of information that may seem unrelated to the reader. Compare this original thesis (too general) with three possible revisions (more focused, each presenting a different approach to the same topic):

* **Original [too general] thesis**:
  + There are serious objections to today's horror movies.
* **Revised [more specific] theses**:
  + Because modern cinematic techniques have allowed filmmakers to get more graphic, horror flicks have desensitized young American viewers to violence.
  + The pornographic violence in "bloodbath" slasher movies degrades both men and women.
  + Today's slasher movies fail to deliver the emotional catharsis that 1930s horror films did.

**4. Is your thesis statement clear?**

Your thesis statement is no exception to your writing: it needs to be as clear as possible. By being as clear as possible in your thesis statement, you will make sure that your reader understands exactly what you mean.

Compare the original thesis (not specific and clear enough) with the revised version (much more specific and clear):

* **Original [unclear] thesis**: Although the timber wolf is a timid and gentle animal, it is being systematically exterminated. [if it's so timid and gentle -- why is it being exterminated?]
* **Revised [clear] thesis**: Although the timber wolf is actually a timid and gentle animal, it is being systematically exterminated because people wrongfully believe it to be a fierce and cold-blooded killer.

**III. Sample thesis statements:**

* ***Bad:*** *George Washington set precedents as president*. [This is a fact, not an argument.]
* ***Good***: *The precedents that Washington set as America’s first president greatly benefited the American political system.* [This is a clear position that can be supported or opposed.]
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* Prompt: “Although America perceived Manifest Destiny as a benevolent movement, it was in fact an aggressive imperialism pursued at the expense of others.” Assess the validity of this statement with specific reference to American expansionism in the 1840s.

***Bad:*** *Manifest Destiny was an expansion of American superiority over the continent and affected many.*

***Good:*** *During the mid 1800s, Manifest Destiny was presented as a positive “benevolent movement,” though in reality, it promoted cultural superiority, aggressive foreign policy, and extended the already existing sectional crisis. [possible introductory sentences of body paragraphs follow]*

* A belief in the racial and cultural superiority of white Americans was a tenet of the Manifest Destiny movement.
* Because it was widely accepted that it was America’s destiny, even duty to go west, many accepted aggressive foreign policy as a means of fulfilling that duty.
* Westward expansion during this era only deepened the debate between North and South: Would there be slavery in the new territories?

***Good:*** *Manifest Destiny was indeed aggressive in nature, but this position for expansion was a necessary sentiment for congressmen and citizens alike, seeking territorial, financial, and social gain.*

***Good:*** *Because it resulted in a brutal Mexican War in which many people lost their lives, the philosophy of Manifest Destiny was indeed an aggressive and selfish phenomenon of the 1840s.*

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***Bad:*** *There are some negative and positive aspects to the Banana Herb Tea Supplement. [*This is a weak thesis statement. First, it fails to take a stand. Second, the phrase “*negative and positive aspects”* is vague.]

***Good:*** *Because Banana Herb Tea Supplement promotes rapid weight loss that results in the loss of muscle and lean body mass, it poses a potential danger to customers. [*This is a strong thesis because it takes a stand and is specific.]

Retrieved from: <http://www.cws.illinois.edu/workshop/writers/tips/thesis/#questions> and [*http://www.indiana.edu/~wts/pamphlets/thesis\_statement.shtml*](http://www.indiana.edu/~wts/pamphlets/thesis_statement.shtml)

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**Thesis-Writing Practice—APUSH Support Learning Connections**

**Choose three of the following prompts and write a thesis on each:**

1. Compare and contrast the demographic, ethnic, and social character of Britain’s colonies in the eighteenth century, and indicate how colonial society had changed since the seventeenth century.
2. Identify the major religious denominations of the eighteenth-century colonies, and evaluate their role in early American society.
3. Compare and contrast France’s colonial settlements and their expansion with Britain’s colonies in North America.
4. Explain the colonists’ role in the Seven Years’ War (French and Indian War), and explain the political, economic and ideological consequences of the French defeat for Americans.
5. Explain how and why the British victory in the Seven Years’ War (French and Indian War) became one of the causes of the American Revolution.
6. Explain the theory and practice of mercantilism and why Americans resented it.
7. Explain why Britain adopted policies of tighter political control and higher taxation of Americans after 1763 and how these policies sparked fierce colonial resentment.