

Thesis Statement

Characteristics of a thesis sentence

- It is a sentence.
- It names the topic of your paper and contains an interpretive assertion about your topic—in other words, you are saying something about the topic that is an opinion-based statement about the meaning of the work.
- It is debatable—it is not merely factual or obvious but requires convincing proof of its validity. A factual statement is verified by data or merely reflects the facts of the work (such as plot). An obvious statement is an idea that anyone who reads the work would agree with; its validity has been established by general consensus and requires no additional proof.
- It is specific—it is expressed in language that focuses on one or more particular aspects of the work rather than a generality.
- It controls everything that goes into your paper (the assertion is also known as the “controlling idea.”)

The thesis of an essay is expressed in a declarative sentence

NOT: Who is the protagonist of *The Crucible*?

BUT: The real protagonist of Arthur Miller’s *The Crucible* is not an individual but the town of Salem.

The thesis of a literary essay makes an assertion (an opinion-based interpretive statement) about the topic of the essay.

NOT: *The Crucible* is a great play.

BUT: The greatness of *The Crucible* lies in its incisive exploration of the forces that combine to destroy a community.

The thesis of a literary essay is debatable rather than factual

NOT: *The Crucible* is a play about the Salem witchcraft trials.

BUT: *The Crucible* uses the Salem witchcraft trials to explore the conflict between conscience and conformity.

The thesis of a literary essay targets a specific rather than a general aspect of its topic.

NOT: *The Crucible* is a play about hidden sin.

BUT: *The Crucible* demonstrates the effects of hidden sin on John Proctor’s character, on his family, and on his community.

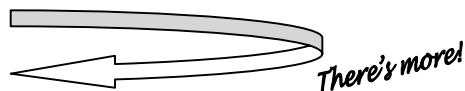
Patterns for Thesis Statements in Literary Essays

1. Analysis

What it does: separates a topic into its individual parts, examines the parts, and shows how the parts relate to the whole

Answers the question: How does understanding this part [section(s), character(s), symbol(s), image(s)] help me to understand the whole work?

Example: The three scaffold scenes in *The Scarlet Letter* dramatize the three major conflicts in the novel, man vs. society, man vs. himself, and man vs. man.



2. Cause and Effect

What it does: explains how or why something happens or exists, or identifies what may have led up to something, or shows what the result of something is

Answers the questions: What are the causes of this situation?
What are the results of this situation?

Example: *The Scarlet Letter* explores the physical, emotional, and psychological effects of hidden sin.

3. Comparison/Contrast

What it does: shows how two things are alike and why this is significant or shows how two things are different and why this is significant

Answers the questions: In what ways is X similar to Y?
In what ways is X different from Y?
Why is this important?

Example: Abigail Williams and John Proctor are well-matched antagonists because both are emotional, rebellious, and stubborn.

4. Key Concept

What it does: identifies and explains how an important idea functions in the work

Answers the questions: What is an important idea in this work?
How does the author develop it?

Example: Hawthorne's "Dr. Heidegger's Experiment" develops the theme that second chances are wasted on most people.

5. Literary Technique

What it does: isolates one or two literary devices used by the author and explains how they function in the work

Answers the questions: What important literary device does the author use in this work?
What is its function?

Example: In "The Pit and Pendulum" Poe uses suspense and irony to show how a man's fate is influenced by a combination of intellect and luck

6. Refuting an Accepted Idea

What it does: argues against a traditional or commonly held idea about a literary work or reveals a different cause/effect than is generally accepted

Answers the question: Why is this common assertion incorrect?

Example: Although John Proctor is generally held to be the "hero" of *The Crucible*, the town of Salem is actually the play's protagonist.