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# Tutors: “Theses” the Problem: Students and Thesis Statements

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ENGL4910—Writing Center Tutors Practicum

Tutors: “Theses” the Problem: Students and Thesis Statements

**Key Words:** thesis statement, main idea, essay, writing, argument, understanding, comprehension, introduction, conclusion, evidence

**Abstract:** Although it is a common element of academic writing, the thesis statement is woefully misunderstood and misused by many new college students. The Writing Center staff spends too much time reexplaining this principle and helping visiting students construct a solid thesis; time that could be better spent on other key aspects of their essays, like content and organization. This essay strives to explain what a thesis statement is, how it is crafted, how and why students have such a poor understanding of the concept, and what can be done to fix this obnoxious issue.

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“Theses” the Problem: Students and Thesis Statements

This sentence is not a thesis statement. That comes later; this part is the introduction. The thesis statement, or main idea, is almost always required to appear at the end of the introduction. These rigid requirements can frustrate new or unskilled college students and writers. Incoming freshmen students of the Utah State University do not often seem to understand the value of the thesis statement within their written work. Indeed, students rarely understand thesis statements. The Writing Center spends too much time reteaching such a key concept when the time should be spent on improving the content of the essay. The thesis statement is extremely important in academic writing, the center of western argument. The teaching and reteaching thereof by instructors—not by tutors—should be of prime concern, so the Writing Center can help students with other elements of their writing.

According to the University of North Carolina Writing Center, a thesis statement is “a road map for the paper; in other words, it tells the reader what to expect from the rest of the paper.” A thesis statement encapsulates the main idea of the essay “in one or two sentences” (Writers Tips). A thesis should not be something long, like a paragraph. Clarity and conciseness are the core of it. Everything that follows thereafter must pertain to this one sentence in some way or another. In fact, Purdue OWL writes that a thesis “should cover only what you will discuss in your paper and should be supported with specific evidence” (Developing a Thesis). The evidence that Purdue OWL refers to makes up the remainder of the essay. The University of

Illinois Writing Center urges writers to be “as clear and specific as possible.” A strong thesis statement is the keystone in the arch of a paper. Without it, the stance of the written work collapses. The statement should make an argument, or “a claim that others might dispute” (Writers Tips). Without a thesis statement, an essay collapses and “the writing loses focus” (Writers Tips). In summarizing the primary theme of a given written work, the thesis statement is vital to the organizational integrity of any argument.

Newer university students often do not understand thesis statements or at least have a poor comprehension thereof. This has become clear to me after many Writing Center sessions, though I am not myself a seasoned tutor. I have straightforwardly asked a student, “what is your thesis statement?” Just as many times, he or she often hesitates and stumbles over an ambiguous explanation. Usually, what they explain is either too vague or intricately detailed. For instance, I asked a student who was writing about gun control for their thesis statement. They gave a brief discourse about the betterment of humanity with almost no mention of an actual stance on firearms or the Second Amendment. Time was then spent clarifying what was wrong with that idea of a thesis statement and how to recraft it to cover a stance and establish an argument. When I made same inquiry to another visiting student, they were by no means indefinite in their answer. Indeed, he was far too thorough. They pulled out a written outline from their backpack and explained it in excruciating detail. A large portion of our session was spent on narrowing down the student’s outline to a concise statement that covered all the points. They ended up utilizing a method I taught them that I learned from a professor. Neither of those were originally thesis statements, but could be fixed to be so. While these are easy ways to teach students about thesis statements, we as tutors spend time reexplaining a principle of writing that should be thoroughly ingrained in the scholar’s academic consciousness.

Other tutors with varied experience agree that newer university students do not fully understand the idea behind thesis statements. Andrea Carlquist, a relatively new Writing Center tutor, said that new college students “absolutely do not understand [thesis statements]. They often just point to the first or last sentence of their introduction, but only because they know that’s where it’s supposed to be, not because they actually know it’s a thesis statement” (Carlquist). Jessica Hahn had a similar opinion, though she felt that newer students do sometimes understand; “they sometimes have it right,” she said, “But they give very rudimentary, basic answers” (Hahn). Even when they do understand, it is usually too simple. Brittney Allen, an experienced tutor, agreed that 1010 and 2010 students do not fully comprehend thesis statements, saying, “they don’t get it because pretty often they’re stuck on the ‘requirement’ that their thesis statement has to be at the end of a paragraph. Many times, it ends up as an ‘I feel’ stance statement without elaborating further” (Allen). I am not the only tutor who feels that our clients require an in-class overhaul in their thesis education.

Students need to relearn thesis statements. This uncertainty regarding such a large part of academic writing is toxic and wasteful. Multitudes of arguments have been put forward as to how to improve student writing in both secondary and higher education. These solutions include emphasizing content over grammar and revolutionizing writing topics. These are all valuable contributions to the solution. Reteaching the concept of thesis statements is just as important a resolution. The thesis statement is often taught once or twice in middle school and high school and then left behind and forgotten, presumed to be part of the students’ permanent repertoire. It should not be forgotten. It needs to be taught and retaught and reinforced in class as a principle most imperative to writing as a whole. The teaching of this principle belongs to high school

instructors and college professors. This topic needs to be hit hard. Students are not understanding thesis statements, but they need to.

The Writing Center exists to help students improve their writing; too much time, however, is spent on teaching the thesis statement. True, it is an integral part of the content of an essay, but we are tutors, not teachers. Students should already have a firm grasp of the concept. Without a strong thesis as a foundation, any essay is bordering on disaster. Crafting a thesis, especially one revolving around an essay that has already been written, takes time. When thesis statements are weak, too much time in a session is required restructuring them, often making a new one completely. This time in sessions can be spent on other parts of the essay, other weaknesses in the students' writing: the content of their arguments, the order and manner in which they present stances and research. The Writing Center should help with thesis statements. That is not the issue. Students, particularly from English 1010 and 2010 consistently come for appointments without understanding what professors are expecting from them regarding their theses. That is the true issue. While the tutors at the Writing Center are happy to reteach and reapply this concept, instructors should have already explained the idea and their expectations.

There are a variety of ways thesis statements can be taught; for instance, theses can be taught through examples. A thesis statement can be crafted with relative ease, though it may require time and thought. Purdue OWL gives an excellent example of a thesis statement about the college admission process: "An analysis of the college admission process reveals one challenge facing counselors: accepting students with high test scores or students with strong extracurricular backgrounds." Purdue goes on to explain that "the paper that follows should...explain the analysis of the college admission process" and "explain the challenge facing

admissions counselors” (Developing a Thesis). Like the latter example, the ideal thesis statement should capture the main idea, but also, the points that reinforce said idea.

Thesis statements can also be taught by giving basic thesis structures and letting students fill in the blanks. Utah State University’s own Dr. Shane Graham, an English professor, also has an excellent and simple method for structuring theses. His system is so good, I have personally taught it to several visiting students. Other tutors also teach it. That is how great it is. It begins with an acknowledgement of the opposite opinion in the form of an “although” statement. A definite declaration of the actual main idea follows. For example, “Although many people think the *Star Wars* prequel trilogy is terrible, it does have redeeming qualities.” A secondary sentence may follow to clarify the thesis further (Graham). This is not the required format for a thesis statement, but is an excellent one to use if one does is unsure how to construct their own thesis. Other structures can be used. Theses are not difficult to construct. They do, though, require time and thought to write well. Although there is no perfect way to write a thesis statement, teaching structures like Dr. Graham’s, while featuring the featuring the above disclaimer, can help students to understand the idea better. A lack of understanding is the only true barrier to crafting a strong thesis statement.

If more time were spent in high school classes and in early college-level English classes teaching about thesis statements, this would not be a problem. In my experience, I was taught about thesis statements in middle school, and the concept was almost never brought up again. I had a decent comprehension of theses, but an imperfect one. It was only working with professors—during their office hours, not during class time—that I was able to understand what was expected of me in terms of the thesis in a more complete sense. This can regularly be the case for other students. So many students come into the Writing Center talking about how much

they dislike writing or how they are a bad writer. These students do not know where to begin with their projects. Something as simple as reteaching a student about thesis statements and helping them make one gives them such a huge feeling of relief. Their stress and their worries would not have happened if they had just been retaught thesis statements. Just one day, maybe even half a class period, spent reteaching this important aspect of writing could help students from all majors write more confidently and enjoy the process. Everyone wins when theses are retaught.

As in the introduction, this is not a thesis statement, either. This is the beginning of the conclusion. Here the writer synthesizes their points, whatever that means. The restated thesis does not come until the end of the conclusion. It often comes with a call to action. The thesis is of utmost importance to persuasive writing; it gives one's argument and writing both direction and clarity. Many incoming students do not seem to understand the significance of the thesis. Hopefully, professors and high school teachers can begin reteaching this principle and make a point of emphasizing its necessity in academic writing. As they do so, the Writing Center can help students improve on a far more diverse set of writing skills, and these students will come to enjoy writing all the more for it.

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