

Literary Thesis Statements

University assignments often involve some form of essay writing; in most cases, an essay requires a thesis statement that informs the reader of the position you're taking and summarizes the main point or argument that your essay will make. How you go about crafting your thesis statement often depends on the type of essay you're writing. In a literary analysis, your instructor is likely expecting you to make a point about the themes or devices at work within a particular story, novel, or play and how these elements impact one's reading of the text.

Questions to consider when creating a literary thesis statement

Have I answered the research question? A good place to start when creating a thesis statement is to consider the question that your paper is trying to answer. The answer to the research question is your thesis statement. If your assignment prompt is not provided in the form of a question, then try rephrasing it as such; this can also be helpful when narrowing a broad prompt into a more specific basis for a thesis statement. For instance, a prompt like "Analyze the notion of power in Shakespeare's *Othello*" could be rephrased and specified to "How does the notion of power impact the title character in Shakespeare's *Othello*?" If you find that your thesis misses the point of the question or prompt, then you should redirect the focus of your argument.

What is the scope of my research? Your thesis statement creates the framework for your essay. This is important, as the scope of a 1,000-word paper will be narrower than that of a 20,000-word dissertation. What range of topics will you explore? What are the parameters or limitations of your research?

Is my thesis focused on a specific literary aspect of the text(s)? If your instructor is asking for a literary analysis, be careful not to make moral judgments of the text's themes or broader subjective claims that a text is "good" or "bad." For example, arguing that "*The Book Thief* is a bad novel because stealing is wrong" does not leave room for an analysis of the text as a work of literature. Instead, consider elements of the text that are important to its structure, meaning, or overall effect on the reader.

Could someone else challenge or oppose my position? The key to creating an argument is to take a stance that someone else could present a counterargument against. If your thesis is simply a statement of fact (e.g., *The Catcher in the Rye* is a coming-of-age novel), then there is no way for anyone to disagree with you and, therefore, no argument to be made. Try interrogating your thesis to generate more cause for debate (e.g., *Why do you think The Catcher in the Rye is a coming-of-age novel? What are the qualities of a coming-of-age story? How does this novel engage with them?*).

Does my thesis match the conclusion of my essay? While it's normal for your research question – or sometimes even your main argument – to change over the course of the research and writing process, make sure your final thesis statement accurately reflects the overall conclusion of your paper. A thesis that does not match your argument will leave your reader confused about what you're trying to say. Always remember to re-examine and revise your writing wherever necessary.

"So what?" At the end of the day, your thesis statement should answer the "So what?" question. Why is your analysis of this text significant? How does your argument change, impact, or deepen the reader's understanding of the topic? If you are struggling to come up with an answer to this question, you may need to include further detail or connect your thesis statement to a larger issue. What will your analysis reveal about the text?

Examples

When writing a literary analysis, your thesis statement will highlight the techniques, themes, symbols, or plot points at work within a text and outline your investigation of how these literary devices impact the audience's interpretation, appreciation, or understanding of this text. There are many ways to structure a literary thesis statement, but here are a few examples to get you started:

By [utilizing/engaging with X literary device/technique] in [title of work], [author] demonstrates/illustrates/highlights/etc. [your interpretation of the text].

- By shifting narrative point of view throughout *The Edible Woman*, Margaret Atwood illustrates the fragmentation of feminine selfhood within patriarchal systems.
- By opening and closing *The Outsiders* with the same lines, S. E. Hinton demonstrates the cyclical nature of class conflict.

In [title of work], [author] uses [literary device/technique] to enhance/illustrate/etc. [some aspect of the text].

- In *Macbeth*, Shakespeare uses repetitive grammar, diction, and rhetoric to highlight the threatening, otherworldly nature of the Witches.
- In "Open Secrets," Alice Munro utilizes the disappearance of Heather Bell as a metaphor for the ways in which girlhood has vanished from the lives of the story's remaining women.

While [X] is a popular interpretation/commonly discussed element of [title of work], [your interpretation] illuminates/develops/highlights [a different aspect of the text].

- While many critics associate Jay Gatsby with the "green light" of his desire, F. Scott Fitzgerald foreshadows not only Gatsby's ultimate death but also the futility of this desire through the character's more frequent association with darkness and obscurity throughout *The Great Gatsby*.
- While scholars often study Audre Lorde's "The Black Unicorn" through the lenses of feminism and antiracism, an ecocritical reading of the poem reveals an equally powerful environmentalist statement.