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Thesis Statements for a Literature Assignment

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Main Page

A thesis prepares the reader for what you are about to say. As such, your paper needs to be interesting in order for your thesis to be interesting. Your thesis needs to be interesting because it needs to capture a reader's attention. If a reader looks at your thesis and says "so what?", your thesis has failed to do its job, and chances are your paper has as well. Thus, make your thesis provocative and open to reasonable disagreement, but then write persuasively enough to sway those who might be disagree.

Keep in mind the following when formulating a thesis:

- A Thesis Should Not State the Obvious
- Use Literary Terms in Thesis With Care
- A Thesis Should be Balanced
- A Thesis Can be a Blueprint

Avoid the Obvious

A thesis prepares the reader for what you are about to say. As such, your paper needs to be interesting in order for your thesis to be interesting. Your thesis needs to be interesting because it needs to capture a reader's attention. If a reader looks at your thesis and says "so what?", your thesis has failed to do its job, and chances are your paper has as well. Thus, make your thesis provocative and open to reasonable disagreement, but then write persuasively enough to sway those who might be disagree.

Bland: Dorothy Parker's "Résumé" uses images of suicide to make her point about living.

This is bland because it's obvious and incontestable. A reader looks at it and says, "so what?"

However, consider this alternative:

Dorothy Parker's "Résumé" doesn't celebrate life, but rather scorns those who would fake or attempt suicide just to get attention.

The first thesis merely describes something about the poem; the second tells the reader what the writer thinks the poem is about--it offers a reading or interpretation. The paper would need to support that reading and would very likely examine the way Parker uses images of suicide to make the point the writer claims.

Use Literary Terms in Thesis Only to Make Larger Points

Poems and novels generally use rhyme, meter, imagery, simile, metaphor, stanzas, characters, themes, settings and so on. While these terms are important for you to use in your analysis and your arguments, that they exist in the work you are writing about

should not be the main point of your thesis. Unless the poet or novelist uses these elements in some unexpected way to shape the work's meaning, it's generally a good idea not to draw attention to the use of literary devices in thesis statements because an intelligent reader expects a poem or novel to use literary of these elements. **Therefore, a thesis that only says a work uses literary devices isn't a good thesis because all it is doing is stating the obvious, leading the reader to say, "so what?"**

However, you can use literary terms in a thesis if the purpose is to explain how the terms contribute to the work's meaning or understanding. Here's an example of thesis statement that does call attention to literary devices because they are central to the paper's argument. Literary terms are placed in italics.

Don Marquis introduced Archy and Mehitabel in his Sun Dial column by combining the conventions of *free verse poetry* with *newspaper prose* so intimately that in "the coming of Archy," the entire column represents a *complete poem* and not a *free verse poem* preceded by a *prose introduction*.

Note the difference between this thesis and the first bland thesis on the Parker poem. This thesis does more than say certain literary devices exist in the poem; it argues that they exist in a specific relationship to one another and makes a fairly startling claim, one that many would disagree with and one that the writer will need to persuade her readers on.

Keep Your Thesis Balanced

Keep the thesis balanced. If it's too general, it becomes vague; if it's too specific, it cannot be developed. If it's merely descriptive (like the bland example above), it gives the reader no compelling reason to go on. The thesis should be dramatic, have some tension in it, and should need to be proved (another reason for avoiding the obvious).

Too general: Edna St. Vincent Millay wrote many poems with love as the theme.

Too specific: Edna St. Vincent Millay wrote "Love is not all: it is not meat nor drink" in <insert date> after <insert event from her life>.

Too descriptive: Edna St. Vincent Millay's "Love is not all: it is not meat nor drink" is a sonnet with two parts; the first six lines propose a view of love and the next eight complicate that view.

With tension and which will need proving: Despite her avowal on the importance of love, and despite her belief that she would not sell her love, the speaker in Edna St. Vincent Millay's "Love is not all: it is not meat nor drink" remains unconvinced and bitter, as if she is trying to trick herself into believing that love really does matter for more than the one night she is in some lover's arms.

Your Thesis Can Be A Blueprint

A thesis can be used as roadmap or blueprint for your paper:

In "Résumé," Dorothy Parker subverts the idea of what a résumé is--accomplishments and experiences--with an ironic tone, silly images of suicide, and witty rhymes to point out the banality of life for those who remain too disengaged from it.

Note that while this thesis refers to particular poetic devices, it does so in a way that gets beyond merely saying there are poetic devices in the poem and then merely describing them. It makes a claim as to how and why the poet uses tone, imagery and rhyme.

Readers would expect you to argue that Parker subverts the idea of the résumé to critique bored (and boring) people; they would expect your argument to do so by analyzing her use of tone, imagery and rhyme in that order.

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