

Sometimes in professional essays the claim may be implicit, but in the formal essays that you will write for your classes, the claim is traditionally stated explicitly as a one-sentence thesis statement that appears in the introduction of your argument. To be effective, a thesis statement must preview the essay by encapsulating in clear, unambiguous language the main point or points the writer intends to make. Let's consider several different types of thesis statements: a closed thesis, an open thesis, and a thesis that includes the counterargument.

Closed Thesis Statements

A **closed thesis** is a statement of the main idea of the argument that also previews the major points the writer intends to make. It is "closed" because it limits the number of points the writer will make. For instance, here is a closed thesis on the appeal of the Harry Potter book series:

The three-dimensional characters, exciting plot, and complex themes of the Harry Potter series make them not only legendary children's books but enduring literary classics.

This thesis asserts that the series constitutes a "literary classic" and specifies three reasons—characters, plot, and theme—each of which would be discussed in the argument. A closed thesis often includes (or implies) the word *because*. This one might have been written as follows:

The Harry Potter series has become legendary children's books and enduring literary classics because of its three-dimensional characters, exciting plot, and complex themes.

Indeed, that statement might be a good working thesis.

A closed thesis is a reliable way to focus a short essay, particularly one written under time constraints. Explicitly stating the points you'll make can help you organize your thoughts when you are working against the clock, and it can be a way to address specific points that are required by the prompt or argument.

Open Thesis Statements

If, however, you are writing a longer essay with five, six, or even more main points, then an open thesis is probably more effective. An **open thesis** is one that does not list all the points the writer intends to cover in an essay. If you have six or seven points in an essay, for instance, stringing them all out in the thesis will be awkward; plus, while a reader can remember two or three main points, it's confusing to keep track of a whole string of points made way back in an opening paragraph. For instance, you might argue that the Harry Potter series is far from an enduring classic because you think the main characters are either all good or all bad rather than a bit of both, the minor characters devolve into caricatures, the

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plot is repetitious and formulaic, the magic does not follow a logical system of rules, and so on. Imagine trying to line all those ideas up in a sentence or two having any clarity and grace at all. By making the overall point without actually stating every subpoint, an open thesis can guide an essay without being cumbersome:

The popularity of the Harry Potter series demonstrates that simplicity trumps complexity when it comes to the taste of readers, both young and old.

Counterargument Thesis Statements

A variant of the open and closed thesis is the **counterargument thesis**, in which a summary of a counterargument usually qualified by *although* or *but* precedes the writer's opinion. This type of thesis has the advantage of immediately addressing the counterargument. Doing so may make an argument seem both stronger and more reasonable. It may also create a seamless transition to a more thorough concession and refutation of the counterargument later in the argument. Using the Harry Potter example again, let's look at a counterargument thesis:

Although the Harry Potter series may have some literary merit, its popularity has less to do with storytelling than with merchandising.

This thesis concedes a counterargument that the series "may have some literary merit" before refuting that claim by saying that the storytelling itself is less popular than the movies, toys, and other merchandise that the books inspired. The thesis promises some discussion of literary merit and a critique of its storytelling (concession and refutation) but will ultimately focus on the role of the merchandising machine in making Harry Potter a household name.

Note that the thesis that considers a counterargument can also lead to a position that is a modification or qualification rather than an absolute statement of support or rejection. If, for instance, you were asked to discuss whether the success of the Harry Potter series has resulted in a reading renaissance, this thesis would let you respond not with a firm "yes" or "no," but with a qualification of "in some respects." It would allow you to ease into a critique by first recognizing its strengths before leveling your criticism that the popularity was the result of media hype rather than quality and thus will not result in a reading renaissance.

• ACTIVITY •

Develop a thesis statement that could focus an argument in response to each of the following prompts. Discuss why you think that the structure (open, closed, counterargument) you chose would be appropriate or effective.