

## RTW PLUS: Thesis Statements

In most college-level essays, writing a strong thesis statement is one of the most crucial tasks you will perform. A well-written thesis statement can be used to persuade, analyze, interpret or inform, and can often provide an organizational framework for the entire essay yet to come. A thesis statement is usually crafted in the form of a single complex sentence near the end of the introductory paragraph. So what makes a strong thesis statement?

A good thesis should:

- Directly address the mission asked of you. If you are writing an argumentative essay, your thesis should have an argumentative stance that is contestable. If you are writing a compare/contrast essay, your thesis should succinctly state the similarities and differences of your topic. If you are given a prompt, your thesis should be written as a direct response to that prompt.
- Specifically set the expectations for the rest of the paper. Many skilled writers find ways to tuck the main points of the essay into the thesis statement. This isn't a rule, but it's often a useful tool. It's important to remember that everything that comes later in the essay should be governed by the mission you have detailed in your thesis.
- Demonstrate sophisticated critical thinking skills. A good thesis statement should feel important and it should feel fresh. It should also be clear and specific. This will take a great deal of intellectual effort on your part—and probably a great deal of revision—in order to hit the perfect balance of tone and content.

Suppose you are asked to write an essay which will convince an audience to read Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*. Your thesis writing process might look something like this:

**1<sup>st</sup> attempt: Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* is an excellent novel.**

Well, it's a start. This thesis clearly states a position on the book, but it gives the audience no substance. This thesis doesn't contain any original idea; it takes the easy way out. This doesn't help your readers much, and it isn't going to be particularly useful as an organizational tool for the essay. Try again.

**2<sup>nd</sup> attempt:** In *Invisible Man*, Ralph Ellison describes the oppression and racism found in a number of American institutions.

Getting warmer. This thesis is much more specific than the previous one. There is clearly some intellectual energy demonstrated here in the way this thesis engages with one of the book's most important themes. It's also clear from the statement what the readers should expect in the paragraphs to follow. However, this thesis loses sight of the original mission, which was to convince an audience to read the book. Despite its potential, this thesis sounds more like summary than persuasion. While we're at it, let's try and be more specific with "American institutions." Which ones? Don't be vague.

**3<sup>rd</sup> attempt:** Because of Ralph Ellison's detailed description of the oppression and racism found in the American institutions of education, labor, and law enforcement, *Invisible Man* is a crucial book for anyone interested in how systemic racism works.

This final draft succeeds on each level of the bullet points listed above. It addresses the mission, it sets the expectations for the essay, and it demonstrates strong critical thinking skills.



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