

FORMULATING A THESIS

A thesis is your position on an issue. It's an informed opinion that someone could disagree with.

The first thing you have to decide, before you even begin writing, is generally what you're probably going to say about the topic you've been assigned. (Sometimes it changes a bit as you write, but you should know where you're going before you start.)

Your assigned topic will normally fall into one of two categories. It may ask you to present an argument on something, usually a relationship between people, like so:

(1) Discuss the impact Napoleon Bonaparte had on France's political and social landscape.

Or the question may itself assert something and ask you to agree or object.

(2) Hubert Constantine has said that the harm Bonaparte did to France is comparable to Godzilla rising up from the Atlantic and laying waste to every farm, village, and city in Western Europe. Discuss Dr. Constantine's statement.

The first type of question gives you a little more leeway in choosing a position. The second question obliges you to deal with the opinion of the (entirely made up, by the way) Dr. Constantine in presenting your own ideas.

In either case you must begin by coming up with a statement that reflects your understanding of the topic and your opinion on it. A research paper is not an opportunity to recite a laundry list of facts relating to the topic. This requires no skills and furnishes no insight. A research paper presents an argument and methodically supports it.

It is a good idea to set up your argument, or thesis, as a positive statement of belief:

I believe that Bonaparte's wars of conquest were severely detrimental to France's internal economy and external relations with Europe.

So here you are arguing that Bonaparte was bad for France. The question can certainly be (and is) argued the other way; those who study this period may not agree on whether Bonaparte was good for France, or to what extent. Very few questions in history are not open to debate and new interpretations – as long as those interpretations can be supported. The important thing, since you are writing the paper, is what you believe, and what you can support with evidence. (More on supporting evidence in a moment.) Having done your readings and research is crucial here. You cannot formulate a thesis without thoroughly understanding the topic. And you cannot write a research paper that does not spring from a solid, assertive, supportable thesis.

Once again, you must be arguing a position. "Napoleon was a French emperor who killed a lot of Europeans" is not a thesis, because this statement is essentially a matter of record. We already know this.

But the sample thesis statement above is not a matter of record. It is something that you must persuade the reader of; it is something that could be debated, the result being judged on the persuasiveness of the arguments presented by the opposing sides. You must set out to win that debate and persuade your audience. Notice also: My thesis statement has taken the assigned topic (essentially "Napoleon: good or bad?") and gotten **more specific**. Why? It's easier to defend a specific assertion.