

245W: Thesis statementsⁱ

Thesis statements can be elusive. The definition of a thesis statement is “an explanation of the topic or purpose of a research paper” (Lexico Publishing Group 2008). Most of us understand what it is, especially since in many college courses, instructors emphasize how important they are and how you must absolutely have one in your written assignments. Yet, among the books on writing in biology I have been thumbing through, and only one has a couple of pages that describes how you develop a thesis statement. How do you go from your readings, to your topic, to your thesis statement?

Most of us take notes while we are reading our primary literature. Pechenik (2004) suggests asking yourself the following questions while you take notes, in order to “look for patterns, and for exceptions to those patterns”:

- Why am I writing this down?
- What is especially interesting about this particular information?
- What puzzles me about what I have read?
- Can I see any relationship between this information and what I have already read, written, or learned?
- What assumptions did the authors make, and does each assumption seem reasonable and well supported?

Since you will be reading your sources at least a few times each, every time you read a particular article again your brain is probably already doing this type of connect-the-dots exercise on its own. As you continue to expand your reading to address the gaps in your knowledge about your topic, you will start to see how all your papers mesh together to support the way you understand your topic. This new understanding is the basis of your thesis statement. Because no two people understand anything in exactly the same way, even if you were writing about a similar research topic as another student in the same class, the two of you could potentially come up with fundamentally different thesis statements.

The thesis statement itself is an edited version of what you’d like to say about your topic based on your understanding. It should portray what you find interesting about your topic, as well as demonstrate that you have thoroughly researched and understood your topic. As your reading expands your understanding, you will have to revise your thesis statement so that it accurately represents the development of your understanding. Pechenik duly notes that “this statement will fuel your entire project. You will present [your thesis] statement near the beginning of your term paper, and devote the rest of the paper to supporting it.”

References

- Lexico Publishing Group. 2008. Thesis statement. (n.d.). Webster’s New Millennium™ Dictionary of English, Preview Edition, v 0.9.7. Available at <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/thesis statement>. Accessed March 16, 2008.
- Pechenik, J. A. 2004. *A Short Guide to Writing about Biology*, 5th ed. Pearson Longman

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