

Writing a Thesis Statement

1. What is a thesis statement?

The thesis is the controlling idea around which you construct the rest of your paper. In a social studies paper, the thesis generally explains why or how something happened. (For you, it will be a one-sentence answer to the research question you were given.) A social studies paper takes a stand on an issue or a problem, and develops a persuasive argument intended to convince the reader. Your thesis is the concise, single sentence statement of your argument and summarizes the **central idea or purpose of your essay**. Do not simply announce your topic or restate the question. It is important that you clearly indicate in the thesis where you are going with your essay.

2. How to develop a thesis statement

First, one must understand what the question is asking.

All social studies expository essays will require students to respond analytically. In other words, you will be asked to explain *why* something happened, not just that it happened. Once you understand the major point of analysis then you must break the question down. Look for terms that need identification, dates of importance, ways to categorize the essay, the setting, and the subject.

Once this task is completed you need to take a position. How is this question to be answered? Often there are several ways to answer a question. In any case, a clear, complex and creative thesis statement recognizes this characteristic (taking a position) of expository writing and uses this to enhance the overall quality of the essay.

The following United States history exam essay question provides examples of clear and complex thesis statements:

Assess the relative importance of three of the following in the decision to declare war on Germany in 1917.

- German naval policy
- American economic interests
- Woodrow Wilson's idealism
- Allied propaganda
- America's claim to world power

Write your question below.

In breaking down the sample question the following parts are important:

Assess the relative importance - this is asking which events were most important
decision to declare war
Germany in 1917

This is obviously a question about what caused the U.S. to get involved in World War I.

The following world history essay question provides examples of clear and complex thesis statements:

Trace the development of England's constitutional monarchy.

In breaking down this question the following parts are important:

Trace the development of - this is asking you to identify changes over time
England's constitutional monarchy

This is a question about political changes in Stuart England.

Break down your question. Write out the important parts below.

3. Adequate and complex thesis statements

What is an adequate thesis?

What is a complex thesis?

This is better.

US history question:

There were many causes for U.S. entry into World War I.

This thesis is clear as it uses parts of the question to state an opinion, but it does not address the influence of the events.

There were many causes for U.S. entry into World War I including allied propaganda, Woodrow Wilson's idealism and German naval policy.

This thesis is clear, and the writer has added some complexity and direction to it by listing the themes that will be addressed in the essay.

Although Woodrow Wilson's idealism and German naval policy were important reasons for the United States entry into World War I, the most significant cause was Allied propaganda.

The writer says which cause is most important and begins to analyze in the statement. The thesis takes a clear stand.

World history question:

England underwent several political changes to become a constitutional monarchy.

This thesis is clear as it uses parts of the question to state an opinion, but it is vague and does not address the changes over time.

As Parliament assumed political, economic, and legal power England shifted from an absolute monarchy to a limited constitutional monarchy.

This is a clear thesis in which the writer answers the question with a very general reason, outlining the direction of the essay.

The Magna Carta and the creation of Parliament were two events that marked the shift of political, economic, and legal power in England from an absolute monarchy to a constitutional monarchy, but the people of England did not acquire these changes easily.

In this thesis statement the writer gives the specific events that caused the changes and includes the types of changes. There is also mention of the sacrifice for achieving these changes.

The following words are used in analysis and add sophistication to the thesis statement:

although, because, since, unless, not, or, but, nevertheless, however

**Try to use one of these words in your thesis statement.*

4. How to present a thesis statement in an introductory paragraph

The thesis should be contained in a single sentence, which is concise and grammatically correct. In the social studies, the thesis must be in the introductory paragraph. Some teachers, including Mr. Katz, prefer the thesis to be the first sentence of the essay. The rest of the introductory paragraph should draw the reader's attention to the problem the thesis confronts, and defines key terms that appear in the thesis or develop the organizational structure of the essay.

Each social studies essay should include an introduction composed of three parts: background, relevant definitions, and a thesis statement. Background should set the scene. The reader is clearly and quickly informed about the general nature of the topic.

After setting the scene, students should define relevant and/or contested terms. If the question asks, "How revolutionary was the American Revolution?" a successful answer to this question must clearly define what the American Revolution was as well as define the term revolutionary. Defining terms is not only necessary for a successful argument (how can one decide if the Revolution was revolutionary unless one defines the term revolutionary); it also helps the reader understand the sophistication of the response.

Adapted from "How to compose a thesis" by LaJuana Reban