

Thesis Statements

Throughout your college career, you will be tasked with writing thesis-driven texts. A thesis-driven text puts forth a claim—a **thesis**—and supports that thesis with evidence. Therefore, a thesis-driven text is **persuasive** in purpose: it intends to convince the audience (1) that something is the case, (2) to follow some course of action, or (3) both.

The key to writing strong thesis-driven texts is to develop a strong thesis statement. The **thesis statement** is your way of articulating—in just one or two sentences—the claim you are making and why that claim matters to your intended audience. A good thesis statement keeps both you and your audience focused on what your text is truly about.

How to Develop a Strong Research Question

All thesis statements begin as research questions. The **research question** states what you want to find out through your research. Good research questions (1) are open-ended rather than yes/no questions, (2) have not already been thoroughly answered, and (3) are appropriate in scope—not too broad.

Weak research question: Is there still a place for women’s colleges?

This question is a yes/no question, so the writer will have a hard time developing a useful thesis from it.

Better question: How do women’s colleges still have an important educational role?

Now that the question is open-ended, the writer will have an easier time developing this into an interesting, useful thesis. Tip: strong research questions often begin with “why” or “how.”

Weak research question: Why is academic writing challenging for international students?

This question is open-ended, but it has already been answered extensively by other researchers. This question does not add anything new to our understanding of the topic.

Better question: How do international students benefit from an online writing lab?

In contrast, this research question explores new ground: not much has been written about this particular question, so the writer will be able to develop an original, useful thesis from it.

Weak research question: How are writing and thinking connected?

This research question is way too broad: to answer it, the writer will need to delve into various disciplines, including composition studies, pedagogy, and psychology. The writer will have trouble using this question to develop a thesis that is specific, focused, and manageable.

Better question: How can metacognition help students write research papers?

Now, the writer has focused on a specific term from pedagogy and psychology (metacognition) as well as a specific genre of writing (research papers). The writer will be able to use this research question to develop a specific, useful thesis.

Turning a Research Question into a Thesis Statement

After you have developed a strong research question, you do your research to try to answer it. Keep in mind that good research questions often do not have a single “right” answer; for example, if you look at

the three better research questions above, you will notice that they all could be answered in many different ways. Your research will tell you which answers you want to pursue when you write.

After you've done your research, it's time to convert your question into a thesis statement. The defining trait of a thesis statement is that it is **argumentative**: it makes some claim about the topic, a claim which the rest of your text will work to support. Let's return to our good research questions above:

How do women's colleges still have an important educational role?

How do international students benefit from an online writing lab?

How can metacognition help students write research papers?

To turn these research questions into thesis statements, we need to figure out what claim—what argument—we want to make about these topics. In other words, we need to decide how we want to answer our own research question. Here are some examples of how we could answer our questions:

Women's colleges have an important educational role because they offer opportunities that coed colleges do not.

International students benefit from an online writing lab because the online writing lab can house resources on a wide variety of grammatical concepts.

Metacognition can help students write research papers because it encourages them to reflect on their own research practices.

All of these thesis statements have an argumentative claim, something that the writer can persuade the audience of. But to make these into truly effective thesis statements, there's one more thing we need.

Establishing the Exigence of Your Thesis

The **exigence** of your thesis is the “so what?” of your thesis: why does it matter to your audience? How will persuading your audience of your thesis do something important in the world? A good thesis statement will include some statement of exigence, something to get the audience to care about the argument you intend to make. Here's how we could do that with our thesis statements above:

As women's colleges continue to close across the country, we need to recognize the educational opportunities they provide students that coed colleges do not.

International students are valuable members of the student body, but they often lack the resources they need to succeed. An online writing lab can help them access academic resources on a variety of grammatical concepts.

Studies show that students struggle with the research paper genre; however, metacognition can help students with this genre by encouraging them to reflect on their own research practices.

The first example stresses the topic's exigence by presenting the audience with a warning: the endangerment of women's colleges. The second and third examples establish exigence by evoking concern for the affected students. All three examples stress to the audience that there is a problem here, but the writer has an idea for how to address it—and that idea is the writer's thesis.

This resource was prepared by the Cottey College Writing Center.

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