

Imagine you're having dinner with a few friends. Over dessert and coffee, one friend says, "Professor Ellis is my favorite." His statement might elicit a few nods and a comment or two. Another friend takes it up a notch: "I think Dr. Ellis is the best professor at the school." With this statement, your friend has taken a stand, which can inspire some interest and debate. In [response](#), another friend says, "You guys seem to think that being a good professor is all about how available and nice he or she is to the students, but I think it has a lot more to do with the professor's commitment to scholarship. In [fact](#), I think that while Dr. Ellis might be the most popular professor, Dr. Cassidy is, objectively speaking, actually the best." Is this last statement a little more provocative? Might your guests pour a second cup of coffee and stay a little longer? Why?

Making a [Claim](#)

Strong [academic writing](#) takes a definitive stance on the topic it is covering. Rather than simply reporting details, academic writing *uses* details to try to prove a point. This point is often called your "thesis statement," a sentence that expresses your point of view on the topic, which you will support with evidence and research. The key element of a thesis statement is that it is not a fact: it is a claim, something that you have to use evidence to prove. Your thesis is the backbone of your paper, and every fact and idea you add to your paper will support it.

At the dinner party, your friend will give reason after reason why crotchety Dr. Cassidy is actually the superior professor, supporting each reason, we hope, with facts he can back up. By the end of the evening, you may go home with a new respect for Dr. Cassidy's body of scientific research, his ability to make students strive much harder than they do in Dr. Ellis's classes, and his consistent grading policies. If so, your friend will have changed your mind. And it all began with his provocative statement: his thesis.

Elements of a Strong Thesis Statement

1. Focus

You're going to need to make your case within the scope of one paper, so the focus should be narrow enough for you to be able to cover the topic thoroughly. If you're writing a three-page history paper about the Vietnam War, don't set out to prove an enormous claim about the entire conflict. Pick a sub-sub-topic you are interested in, like guerrilla warfare in tropical climates or the use of military helicopters in rescue missions, and focus your thesis statement on what you can prove about that smaller chunk.

2. Specificity

You want the reader to be drawn in immediately to the heart of the [argument](#). That means naming names — for example, not “One theme in Hamlet, is vengeance ... ,” but “In Hamlet, Fortinbras, Laertes, and Hamlet all seek to avenge their fathers ...”

3. The “So What?” Factor

Good writing makes readers care about the topic. When you set out to write and prove your thesis statement, don’t simply have the goal of saying, “This is my claim and here’s evidence to support it.” You’ll want your writing to boil down to, “This is my claim, *here’s why it matters*, and here’s evidence to support it.”

4. Crafting Your Thesis

There is more than one way to write a thesis statement for an academic paper. The most important element is that you are making an original claim and then using facts and evidence to support it. However, there are many ways to express your claim. All of these ways engage with the currently existing body of academic writing, but add something new: your ideas, framed as a claim based on evidence.

5. Tension

One technique for writing a thesis statement is arguing against an existing view. Think of the construction as, “While ____, actually ____.” Your guiding thread through the paper will be to convince those who think the first thing that the second thing is actually true.

Here are two examples of thesis statements with embedded tension:

While [organizations](#) like the American Nazi Party and the Ku Klux Klan may pose a real danger to individuals and the fabric of an integrated society, the tenets of democracy demand that their right to free speech be protected by the American Civil Liberties Union.

While the American Civil Liberties Union has a responsibility to protect free speech, this responsibility is based on preserving democracy and should therefore not be extended to hate groups like the American Nazi Party and the Ku Klux Klan, groups which have as their aim the segregation and division of society.

Whichever side of the issue is taken, you can see that there is inherent tension because of the “While ____, actually ____” construction.

6. Refining

Another way to introduce a [defensible](#) thesis statement is to refine an already existing idea: take a generally accepted [conclusion](#) and stretch it further. There are as many opinions as there are [people](#) in the world, and it can be useful to use someone else's idea as a foundation for your own. However, remember that good theses are based on *original* opinions. Avoid parroting someone else's; rather, reference and build upon it.

7. Analyzing

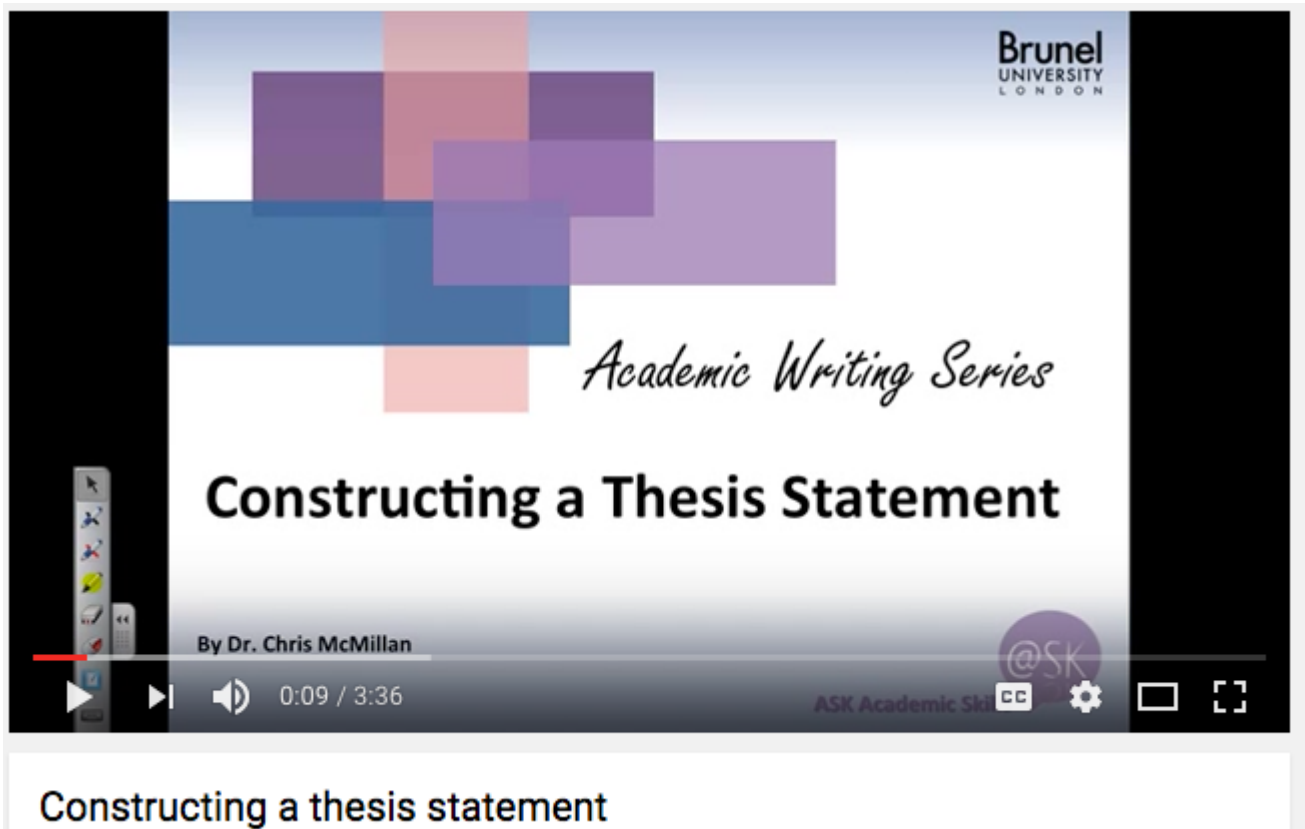
Thesis statements can be used to provide your own original [analysis](#) of something, whether it is a historical event, a piece of literature, or a scientific phenomenon. A thesis statement can be a [hypothesis](#), which you set out to prove through evidence. It can be a connection that nobody has ever thought of before. The key element here is that you are looking at already existing facts and opinions, and then putting them together to prove your idea.

8. Addressing Counter-Arguments

Once you have a thesis statement, you'll want to gather evidence both for and against the statement. You might even want to create, as was done above, a thesis statement that is the opposite of yours and look for research proving both of them. (This is a debating technique that allows the debater to skillfully parry any [counter-argument](#).) Including counter-arguments in your paper is a technique we'll discuss in the [drafting](#) section. For now, be sure to collect information on both sides of your thesis.

Make a list of the strongest arguments for and against your thesis statement. You're not thinking so much in terms of numbers here but rather a strength. If you can't make several strong points, you may want to re-work the thesis.

Creating a thesis and researching go together. One process informs the other, and you will often need to go back and forth several times to create a solid thesis that can be backed by research. Just keep following your interests, your curiosity, and the process will stay enjoyable.



The image shows a video player interface. The video title is "Constructing a Thesis Statement" by Dr. Chris McMillan, part of the "Academic Writing Series" from Brunel University London. The video is currently at 0:09 / 3:36. The player includes standard controls like play, pause, volume, and a progress bar. The video content features a title slide with the Brunel University London logo, the series name "Academic Writing Series", and the main title "Constructing a Thesis Statement".

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Academic Writing Series

Constructing a Thesis Statement

By Dr. Chris McMillan

0:09 / 3:36

ASK Academic Skills

Constructing a thesis statement