

How to Write a Term Paper Proposal

Your term paper proposal needs to have three components:

1. A working title
2. A thesis statement
3. An annotated bibliography

1. Working Title

A working title simply means a title for your term paper that best describes what the term paper is all about. It must be descriptive and crisp. You want to grab your reader's attention. So, it has to be clear and inviting. The reason why it's called a "working title" is that you may change it, if needed, as you progress through writing your paper and get a better sense of the material.

2. Thesis Statement

a. What is a Thesis Statement?

Almost all of us—even if we don't do it consciously—look early in a term paper for a one-or two-sentence condensation of the argument or analysis that is to follow. We refer to that condensation as a thesis statement.

b. Why Should Your Essay Contain a Thesis Statement?

- To test your ideas by distilling them into a sentence or two,
- To better organize and develop your argument,
- To provide your reader with a "guide" to your argument.

In general, your thesis statement will accomplish these goals if you think of the thesis as the answer to the question your paper explores.

c. How Can You Write a Good Thesis Statement?

Here are some helpful hints to get you started.

Your thesis statement needs to answer a question about the issue you would like to explore. In this situation, your job is to figure out what question you would like to write about.

A good thesis statement will usually include the following four attributes:

- Take on a subject upon which reasonable people could disagree,
- Deal with a subject that can be adequately treated given the nature of the assignment,
- Express one main idea,

- State your conclusions about a subject.

Let's see how to generate a thesis statement for a social policy paper.

Brainstorm the topic.

Let's say that your class focuses upon the problems posed by drug addiction. You find that you are interested in the problems of crack babies, babies born to mothers addicted to crack cocaine.

You start out with a thesis statement like this:

Crack babies.

This fragment isn't a thesis statement. Instead, it simply indicates a general subject. Furthermore, your reader doesn't know what you want to say about crack kids.

Narrow the topic

Your readings about the topic, however, have led you to the conclusion that not only do these babies have a difficult time surviving premature births and withdrawal symptoms, but their lives will be even harder as they grow up because they are likely to be raised in an environment of poverty and neglect. You think that there should be programs to help these children.

You change your thesis to look like this:

Programs for crack kids.

This fragment not only announces your subject, but it focuses on one main idea: programs. Furthermore, it raises a subject upon which reasonable people could disagree, because while most people might agree that something needs to be done for these children, not everyone would agree on what should be done or who should do it. You should note that this fragment is not a thesis statement because your reader doesn't know your conclusions on the topic.

Take a position on the topic.

After reflecting on the topic a little while longer, you decide that what you really want to say about this topic is that in addition to programs for crack babies, the government should develop programs to help crack children cope and compete.

You revise your thesis to look like this:

More attention should be paid to the environment crack kids grow up in.

This statement asserts your position, but the terms more attention and the environment are vague.

Use specific language.

You decide to explain what you mean about "the environment", so you write:

Experts estimate that half of crack babies will grow up in home environments lacking rich cognitive and emotional stimulation.

This statement is specific, but it isn't a thesis. It merely reports a statistic instead of making an assertion.

Make an assertion based on clearly stated support.

You finally revise your thesis statement one more time to look like this;

Because half of all crack babies are likely to grow up in homes lacking good cognitive and emotional stimulation, the federal government should finance programs to supplement parental care for crack kids.

Notice how the thesis answers the question, "Why should anything be done for crack kids, and who should do it?" When you started thinking about the paper, you may not have had a specific question in mind, but as you became more involved in the topic, your ideas became more specific. Your thesis changed to reflect your new insights.

d. How to Tell a Strong Thesis Sentence from a Weak One?

- **A strong thesis takes some sort of stand.**

Remember that your thesis needs to show your conclusions about a subject. For example, if you are writing a paper for a class on fitness, you might be asked to choose a popular weight-loss product to evaluate. Here are two thesis statements:

There are some negative and positive aspects to the Banana Herb Tea Supplement.

This is a weak thesis. First, it fails to take a stand. Second, the phrase "negative and positive" aspects" are vague.

Because Banana Herb Tea Supplement promotes rapid weight loss that results in the loss of muscle and lean body mass, it poses a potential danger to customers.

This is a strong thesis because it takes a stand.

- **A strong thesis justifies discussion.**

Your thesis should indicate the point of the discussion. If your assignment is to write a paper on kinship systems, using your own family as an example, you might come up with either of these two thesis statements:

My family is an extended family.

This is a weak thesis because it states an observation. Your reader won't be able to tell the point of the statement, and will probably stop reading.

While most American families would view consanguineal marriage as a threat to the nuclear family structure, many Iranian families, like my own, believe that these marriages help reinforce kinship ties in an extended family.

This is a strong thesis because it shows how your experience contradicts a widely-accepted view. A good strategy for creating a strong thesis is to show that the topic is controversial. Readers will be interested in reading the rest of the essay to see how you support your point.

- **A strong thesis expresses one main idea.**

Readers need to be able to see that your paper has one main point. If your thesis expresses more than one idea, then you might confuse your readers about the subject of your paper. For example:

Companies need to exploit the marketing potential of the Internet, and web pages can provide both advertising and customer support.

This is a weak thesis statement because the reader can't decide whether the paper is about marketing on the Internet or web pages. To revise the thesis, the relationship between the two ideas needs to become more clear. One way to revise the thesis would be to write:

Because the Internet is filled with tremendous marketing potential, companies should exploit this potential by using web pages that offer both advertising and customer support.

This is a strong thesis because it shows that the two ideas are related. Hint: a great many clear and engaging thesis statements contain words like "because," "since," "so," "although," "unless," and "however".

- **A strong thesis statement is specific.**

A thesis statement should show exactly what your paper will be about, and will help you keep your paper to a manageable topic. For example, if you write a paper on hunger, you might say:

World hunger has many causes and effects.

This is a weak thesis statement for two major reasons. First, "world hunger" can't be discussed thoroughly in five or ten pages. Second, "many causes and effects" is vague. You should be able to identify specific causes and effects. A revised thesis might look like this:

Hunger persists in Appalachia because jobs are scarce and farming in the infertile soil is rarely profitable.

This is a strong thesis because it narrows the subject to a more specific and manageable topic and it also identifies the specific causes for the existence of hunger.

3. Annotated Bibliography

Your term paper proposal must have an annotated bibliography. This is a list of 4-5 books, book chapters, articles, etc., that you have carefully read in relation to your term paper, and which address aspects of your thesis question. Here are a couple of links to what an annotated bibliography should look like:

<http://library.ucsc.edu/ref/howto/annotated.html>

<http://libguides.wesleyan.edu/annotbib>

[Please note: the above material is based on several on-line sources.]