



NOTE: This lesson supports the following core skills and assignments:

- *G26.1-2*
- *L12.1-2*
- *R10.1-2*
- *R16.1-2*
- *R18.1-2*
- *R23.1-2*

The Thesis Statement

The thesis statement is simply an ANSWER to the essay prompt. It is the most important sentence in your essay. In fact, since it's an answer to the prompt, it contains your entire essay in seed form. You should take the time necessary to develop it correctly. This involves a) reading carefully, b) discussing thoroughly, and c) thinking deeply – all before you begin to write!

The following practices will help you develop an idea for a strong thesis statement:

1. Watch the class recording of our discussion with the essay prompt in mind.
2. When the discussion turns toward our topic, stop the recording and go back to the text, rereading and taking notes on the passages mentioned in the discussion, and any other passages that you can remember that have bearing on the topic.
3. Ask yourself: *what do these passages suggest about how the author would have answered the essay prompt?*
4. Based on these notes, sketch out a series of one-sentence answers to the essay prompt in your own words, using the guidelines below.

Writing a thesis statement

Once you have an idea for a thesis statement, put it in standard thesis statement format. A good thesis statement must do three things – Answer the prompt, argue a point and account for the author:

1. Answer the prompt

An academic essay is a written response to a “prompt,” or question – just like the one that appears at the top of this lesson. Any essay (or part of an essay) that does not contribute to answering this question directly is pointless! This is especially true, of course, of the thesis statement. A good thesis statement answers the prompt completely in a single sentence.

2. Argue a point

In its answer to a prompt, an academic essay must say something “arguable.” This means that the answer an essay gives must need proving – it can’t be a simple factual statement about the book or a statement of your own personal opinion on the topic. “*Huckleberry Finn* is a popular work of American Literature” may be a true statement, but it cannot be a thesis statement. Likewise, “I found this story quite engaging” may be true enough, but it is not a thesis statement. A quick way to make sure that your thesis statement is arguable is to ask yourself if someone else could reasonably disagree with it. If so, you’ve got an arguable thesis.

3. Account for the author

Students often have strong emotional reactions to and personal opinions about a text. While it is a good thing to engage deeply with the books we read, these reactions and opinions are beside the point of literary interpretation. The point of an academic essay is to explain what the author meant by his work, not to air our own opinions about his topic. The sentence “Craftiness can sometimes be useful, but you should always tell the truth” is not a thesis statement about *Huckleberry Finn*. “Huck did the right thing by refusing to turn Jim in” is likewise not a thesis statement about the novel; it is instead a statement of the student’s judgment about slavery and racism. On the other hand, the sentence “Mark Twain uses the personality of his protagonist to suggest that the glory of human nature is found in its complexity” might be a really good one! A good thesis statement must embody an explanation of the author’s point, rather than a proclamation of our own opinions.

In this assignment, you will write two (2) thesis statements that answer the prompt for this essay project. Later, with your tutor’s help, you will choose one of these as the foundation of your essay.

Supports: The 3-Sentence Quotation

Now let's talk about the second part of the assignment: textual supports! For each of the thesis statements you create this week, you'll need to develop supports. What are they?

Using **textual evidence** to support your thesis statement is the crux of writing from literature. Textual evidence, correctly presented, turns opinion into interpretation. It is only when an argument is based on textual evidence that it can properly claim to explain what the book says – and this is the first and foremost goal of literary interpretation.

Finding Textual Evidence:

1. Go back to **three** places in the text that helped you answer the prompt originally. In other words, revisit the passages that gave you the original idea for your thesis statement.
2. Identify specific sentences or phrases in each passage that support aspects of your thesis statement. These can be things said by one of the characters (that is, you can quote dialogue) or things said by the author/narrator (that is, you can quote narration). These pieces of evidence can support your thesis in a variety of ways:
 - a. They can provide illustrations or examples of your thesis. *Huck's forgiving nature is his most powerful characteristic – examples of this trait getting him into and out of trouble from chapters 1, 3, 5, and 7.*
 - b. They can demonstrate logical steps toward your thesis. *Huck goes through a three-step coming of age process in this story – evidence of early immaturity, cataclysmic change, and later maturity.*
 - c. They can prove parts of your thesis. *Huck's combination of naivete and wisdom is the driving force in this novel – evidence from chapter 3 demonstrating his naivete, and from chapter 14 demonstrating his wisdom.*
 - d. They can show reasons why your thesis is true. *Huck's decision to protect Jim is the climax of the story – evidence that conflict A is resolved there; evidence that denouement begins there, evidence that Theme X is emphasized there*

Developing textual evidence:

Once you have identified specific passages in the text that will support your thesis statement, develop them using the “3-Sentence Quotation” formula. This formula involves using three sentences for every piece of textual evidence: a set-up sentence, a quotation, and a follow-up sentence.

The **set-up sentence** prepares the reader for the quotation by quickly describing the situation in which the quotation occurs and linking this situation to the essay's argument.

Example:

During their first conversation aboard the raft, Huck can tell that the King and the Duke are lying about their identities.

The **quotation** itself comes in the middle of the 3-Sentence formula. It is placed in quotation marks, and includes an author/page citation at the end of the sentence, before final punctuation.

Example:

“It didn't take me long to make up my mind that these liars warn't no kings nor dukes, at all, but just low-down humbugs and frauds” (Twain 237).

The **follow up sentence** explains how the quotation helps prove the thesis statement. It is your most powerful statement of what the quotation means and why it is important. **NEVER USE A QUOTATION WITHOUT A FOLLOW UP SENTENCE!** The follow-up sentence is where you do most of your interpretive work.

Example:

Huck's suspicion of the two charlatans suggests that his native instincts are capable of telling right from wrong.

When you put the 3-sentence quotation together, you will find a complete paragraph beginning to take shape:

During their first conversation aboard the raft, Huck can tell that the King and the Duke are lying about their identities. “It didn't take me long to make up my mind that these liars warn't no kings nor dukes, at all, but just low-down humbugs and frauds” (Twain 237). Huck's suspicion of the two charlatans suggests that his native instincts are capable of telling right from wrong.

Thesis/Supports Assignment

In response to the essay prompt at the beginning of this lesson, write TWO (2) separate thesis statements. For EACH thesis statement, develop THREE 3-sentence quotations (that's a total of six 3-sentence quotations, three for each thesis statement).

Joe Student

Age (in years)

Book Title

Assignment #

Due Date

Thesis and Supports

Thesis Statement #1

Text of your first thesis statement here.

3-Sentence Quotations

Set-up sentence A. Quotation A (with quotation marks and citation). Follow-up sentence A.

Set-up sentence B. Quotation B (with quotation marks and citation). Follow-up sentence B.

Set-up sentence C. Quotation C (with quotation marks and citation). Follow-up sentence C.

Thesis Statement #2

Text of your second thesis statement here.

3-Sentence Quotations

Set-up sentence A. Quotation A (with quotation marks and citation). Follow-up sentence A.

Set-up sentence B. Quotation B (with quotation marks and citation). Follow-up sentence B.

Set-up sentence C. Quotation C (with quotation marks and citation). Follow-up sentence C.