

THESIS STATEMENTS

What is a thesis?

The thesis statement is one of the (if not *the*) most important parts of your paper. It should be introduced in the first paragraph and serve as the focus of your analytic argument. The thesis is the thread that introduces your interpretations of the significant events, beliefs, symbols, behaviors or practices of a particular group or interaction. It should connect your arguments to appropriate anthropological theories that you will use to make sense of your observations or other sources of data. It also should introduce the points that you will develop in the body of your paper. Think of the thesis statement as a contract between you (the writer) and the reader. The thesis makes certain promises to your reader; it then becomes your job to fulfill that promise using specific evidence from observations, transcripts, readings, or quantitative data. The more specific your promise, the easier it will be to find specific evidence to support your argument.

This sheet offers *general* guidelines on writing thesis statements, but it's important to remember: thesis statements are NOT formulas, and a successful one cannot be reduced to its parts. Successful theses provoke thought, they read beautifully, they elaborate on an essential theme of anthropological theory or human evolution or culture, and they consider a *specific* issue.

Your thesis should include three components: WHAT, HOW, and WHY

WHAT—your claim about the event, interaction, practice, or culture

HOW—the conversations, statements, behaviors, positions, artifacts, rules, norms etc. that you use to prove your claim

WHY—how does your idea/argument deepen our understanding of the event, interaction, practice, or culture and situate it within a broader anthropological perspective?
(answers the dreaded “so what?” question)

Example: On the surface, the message board exchange appears to be quite casual, but the rules of the web master provoke an event that has all the elements required of formal speech as outlined in Dell Hymes' Speaking Model. **Participants use increased structuring, specific code choices, and a focus on positional rather than personal identity to reassert the group's norms. The exchange is directed away from sympathy and back to snide humor, demonstrating that communication both reflects and enforces culture.**

Please note:

1. A thesis can be (and probably should be) more than one sentence.
2. The part of the thesis in plain text (“On the surface, the message board exchange appears to be quite casual”) is a potential contradiction to your argument; a strong thesis usually addresses a potential opposing viewpoint. This ability to imagine and answer an opposing viewpoint ensures that your thesis is *arguable*.

3. A good thesis should address these three questions of what? how? and why? in some way. Most students have trouble answering the “so what?” question for their thesis; it is answering this question that makes your argument relevant to larger themes of anthropology. Be careful, though, that your answer to the “so what?” question is not a generalization “about the world we live in, or life in general”; it should be SPECIFIC and justify why and how your argument is significant to the broader topic of your paper.

Where can I get a good thesis statement?

In a crunch, use the Magic Thesis Statement (but adapt it!): By looking at **HOW** (evidence to prove the claim), we can see WHAT (your claim about the text), and this is important because *WHY*.

Some Problems with Thesis Statements

The summary thesis:

The book *Nisa: The Life and Words of a !Kung Woman*, by Marjorie Shostak, relates a !Kung woman’s memories and stories from her childhood and adult life, connecting her personal experiences with the traditions and practices of !Kung culture.

Proving the universal:

The story of Nisa demonstrates that despite very different cultural practices and means of subsistence, women experience very similar emotions and share similar concerns.

The overly general thesis:

Comparing the games of Dani children and American children demonstrates that, from an early age, people learn the values and practices of their culture. [Note: if you can plug another example into your thesis, your thesis is probably too general.]

The cliché thesis:

The story of Nisa demonstrates that love and an indomitable human spirit overcome life’s sorrows and hardships.

The list thesis:

Ethnography and participant observation by the anthropologist mimic the process that children experience. By participating in activities, observing experienced members of the community interact, and imitating the practices involved in certain roles, anthropologists gain greater insight into the directive forces and the procedural and implicit knowledge of a culture, beyond the explicit knowledge available through interviews or questionnaires.

Gender, distracting activity, familiarity, and distance between individuals entering a door influence whether someone will hold the door for another person, suggesting underlying power differences between people of different sexes, as well as unconscious cost/benefit analyses of holding the door.

[There is nothing technically “wrong” with these theses, but they’re really boring! This is a great place to *start* with a thesis statement; then expand and/or finesse the what? how? and why? components.]

Two successful theses:

1. One of the most important subjects in modern psychology and anthropology is children's development from infancy to cultural competence. Historically, children were thought to be primarily shaped by their parents, actively taught to become proficient adults. However, exploration of multiple cultures reveals that children are not necessarily taught to function in their culture but rather acquire the skills and knowledge necessary to be considered culturally competent. Two sources of this acquisition of cultural competence are imitation and language, as illustrated by the study of the Kpelle of West Africa and the Kaluli of the Great Papuan Plateau."

2. Though the variation that exists in the many religions of the world is fascinating, it is also quite remarkable that people from such different societies and ways of life share something so abstract as a belief in some sort of immaterial being. Perhaps the reason that religion is so ubiquitous is also the reason that we don't give its world-wide presence a second thought – it is part of human nature. Pascal Boyer and Melford Spiro are among the scholars who have considered how human psychology may make people susceptible to culturally transmitted religions.

Why are these theses successful?

- They are specific.
- They address a potential contradiction and are arguable.
- They provide a logical way to structure the argument.
- They are fairly daring intellectually and have an interesting “so what?”
- Can you identify the various components?