

CRITICAL THINKING LAB HANDOUT

A BRIEF GUIDE TO CONSTRUCTING THESIS STATEMENTS AND INTRODUCTIONS

I. WHAT IS A THESIS STATEMENT?

A thesis statement is a sentence, within an introduction, that asserts your position on a given topic. It is the central claim that you will be arguing for in your paper.

HOW DO I CONSTRUCT A THESIS STATEMENT?

There is no one way to construct a thesis statement. But it might be helpful to keep several tips and questions in mind as you do so.

First, you will need to thoroughly read the relevant literature. Before you can take a stance on an issue, you must *understand* the particular issue or philosopher who you are responding to. Carefully read through the text and feel free to write down plenty of notes! This will help you develop your original thoughts on the issue.

Second, you will need to determine what position you would like to take on the issue or prompt that you are given. It might help to keep several questions in mind as you do so:

(1) Do you agree or disagree with the particular theory or position presented? In other words, do you want to defend or oppose a given view?

(2) **Why?** Why do you want to argue for or against a given view? Remember, you are asserting your position on a given topic. In doing so, you will need to have compelling *reasons* why you have chosen your particular position over many others.

(3) **So what?** Why should the reader of your paper be interested in your claim? Look beyond your position and try and gather the significance of it. For instance, what or who are you responding to?

THESIS STATEMENTS DO'S AND DON'TS:

✓ *Do* make a claim that can be defended or opposed.

Do not state your feelings on a given topic or merely provide a summary of a philosopher's position.

✓ *Do* make a claim that has a specific and narrow focus.

Do not make a claim that is too broad or ambitious.

✓ *Do* feel free to use statements such as, "I will argue" or "I will demonstrate why". First-person statements can help guide your reader through your argument.

THESIS STATEMENT CHECKLIST:

Does your thesis statement meet the following criteria?

- My thesis *answers* the given prompt.
- My thesis is making an *arguable claim*. It can be defended or opposed.
- My thesis passes the "*So What?*" test. It is interesting and not trivial.
- My thesis is *clear and specific*. It establishes a central and narrow focus in my paper.

AN EXAMPLE OF A GOOD THESIS STATEMENT:

In this paper, I will refute Descartes' argument for the existence of God by showing that it employs circular reasoning. This is significant because if Descartes' argument is circular then knowledge derived from our clear and distinct perceptions is cast into doubt.

II. WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF AN INTRODUCTION?

The purpose of an introduction, in a philosophy paper, is to guide your reader through your central argument and plan for your paper.

HOW DO I CONSTRUCT AN INTRODUCTION?

There is no one way to construct an introduction. But there are several tips and questions you can also keep in mind when writing one. Remember, in an introduction, you are presenting a thesis and guiding your reader through your argument or analysis.

INTRODUCTION DO'S AND DON'TS:

- ✓ *Do* stick to the point in your introduction! **Present your thesis.** What will you be arguing for in your paper? If it is in response to a philosophical position or problem, briefly explain the issue at hand.

Do not begin your paper with inflated, broad statements, such as:

Descartes, dubbed the "father of modern philosophy", was the most important philosopher of the seventeenth century.

Do not begin your paper with broad biographical information, such as:

René Descartes was born in La Haye en Touraine, France to a Roman Catholic family.



- ✓ *Do* define important technical words used in your paper that your reader might not know.

If your paper is on Heidegger's *Being-in-the-world*, explain what Heidegger's term means. It might be helpful to use phrases such as:

By "*Being-in-the-world*", Heidegger means...

Being-in-the-world, per Heidegger, is....

- ✓ *Do* map out and guide the reader through your plan for the rest your paper. Why should the reader care about the claim you are making? Now that your reader knows what your thesis is, explain to her how you will go about arguing for it.

INTRODUCTION CHECKLIST:

Does your introduction meet the following criteria?

- My introduction is *concise*. It does not digress and sticks to the topic at hand.
- My introduction clearly states my *thesis* statement.
- (If relevant) My introduction *defines* any technical terms or classifications that I will be using in my paper.
- My introduction *maps* out the general outline of my paper. The reader of my paper gains a sense of how I will be go about arguing for my thesis and why it is important.

DO I HAVE A GOOD INTRODUCTION?

AN EXAMPLE OF A GOOD INTRODUCTION:

In *Meditations on First Philosophy*, Descartes presents an argument for the existence of God. In this paper, I will refute Descartes' argument for the existence of God by showing that it employs circular reasoning. This is significant because if Descartes' argument is circular then knowledge derived from our clear and distinct perceptions is cast into doubt. First, I will reconstruct Descartes' argument to demonstrate how it presupposes its own conclusion. Second, I will examine a possible objection. I conclude that Descartes' argument is an untenable position.