

[Dennis G. Jerz](#)

[Weblog](#) | [Teaching](#) | [Resources](#) | [About](#)

Thesis Statements: How to Write Them

22 Sep 2006 modified by [Dennis G. Jerz](#)

17 Oct 2000; originally written by Nicci Jordan, UWEC Junior

A thesis statement is the **single, specific claim** that your essay supports. A good thesis statement is not simply an observation, a question, or a promise. It includes a topic, a precise opinion, and reasoning.

Black Elk Speaks accurately represents Indian lifestyle through its attention to cultural detail, its use of Indian words, and its direct quotes from Black Elk.

- **Topic:** *The representation of Indian lifestyle in the book Black Elk Speaks*
- **Precise Opinion:** *the book is accurate*
- **Reasoning Blueprint:** *the book pays attention to cultural detail, it uses Indian words, and it uses direct quotations from Black Elk. The rest of the paper will establish the truth of each of these supporting points, and then explain why they add up to support the truth of the thesis statement.*

For a short paper (1-2 pages), the thesis statement is often the first sentence. A complex thesis statement for a long paper may be part of a thesis paragraph. But it's hard to go wrong if you put your thesis first.

Is Black Elks Speaks an accurate representation of Indian lifestyle?

This is a question, not a statement. It's fine to sit down at the keyboard with the intention of writing a paper to answer this question, but before you start churning out the sentences, you should have a clear idea of what answer you're trying to support.

This paper will look at the book's attention to cultural detail, its use of Indian words, and its direct quotations from Black Elk, in order to determine whether Black Elk Speaks accurately represents Indian lifestyle.

The above sample is slightly better because it offers more detail, but it still doesn't say whether the author plans to argue for or against the book's accuracy.

Because the events in the story emphasize Black Elk's role as a Sioux Warrior, and do not describe Black Elk's eventual conversion to Catholicism and membership in the Society of St. Joseph, Black Elk Speaks presents a skewed and simplified view of the complex history of Native Americans.

Note that the above sample contains a topic (the accuracy of Black Elk Speaks), opinion (it is skewed and simplified), and reasoning (it only tells part of the story). Those three parts don't have to come in that order.

Useful Formulae for Thesis Statements

If you're not sure whether you have a good thesis statement, see whether you can fit your ideas into one of these basic patterns.

- [Something] [does something] because [reason(s)].
- Because [reason(s)], [something] [does something].
- Although [opposing evidence], [reasons] show [Something] [does something].

For longer papers, thesis statements can be very complex.

While [a specific, named person] says [a direct quote or paraphrase from the source], [a different, named person] says [something else]. While the two authors disagree over [a minor point], they both share a deep concern over [the topic of your paper]. [Person one's] refusal to accept [a particular point made by person two] suggests that [person one] is [your thesis -- stating the real reason why person one won't agree with person two].

Parts of a Thesis Statement

The thesis statement has **3 main parts**: the [limited subject](#), the [precise opinion](#), and the [blueprint of reasons](#).

1. Limited Subject

Black Elk Speaks accurately represents Indian lifestyle through its attention to cultural detail, its use of Indian words, and its direct quotes from Black Elk.

The limited subject tells the reader exactly **on what, or whom the article focuses**. The book title (*Black Elk Speaks*), from the example, is the limited subject of the thesis statement:

Biographies of all types can teach us many things about the past. What was the culture like? What was the language like? And what did the people say? One such book is Black Elk Speaks, which tells the story of a Sioux warrior in the late 1800s. How accurate is this book? This paper will investigate the cultural details, the language, and what Black Elk actually said, in order to determine the answer.

The above sample starts off with a wordy, general statement about biographies. But the main topic isn't about biographies of all types, it's specifically about one book, Black Elk Speaks.

2. Precise Opinion

The precise opinion gives your **answer to a question** about the subject. A good **precise opinion is vital** to the reader's comprehension of the **goal of the essay**.

Black Elk Speaks *accurately represents* Indian lifestyle by its attention to cultural detail, its use of Indian words, and its direct quotes from Black Elk.

In order to demonstrate college-level thinking, your opinion should be non-obvious, and it should be possible for a reasonable person to disagree with you. There aren't many reasonable counter-arguments for claims like "Drug abuse is bad" or "The Nazi regime's execution of 6 million innocent Jews was horrible." That's because it's always wrong to "abuse" anything, and it's always wrong to execute the innocent.

Does *Black Elk Speaks* accurately represent Indian lifestyle?

A question is not an opinion. You may, of course, wish to argue that a particular question is unanswerable, or not even worth asking -- but that would still be an opinion that you would have to back up just like any other opinion.

Black Elk Speaks *fails to represent* Indian lifestyle by its lack of attention to cultural detail, its misunderstanding of Indian words, and its lack of quotes from Black Elk himself.

*This precise opinion also tells how the author feels, yet it is completely opposite from the original example. **Either is acceptable**, as long as the rest of the essay supports the opinion.*

3. Blueprint of Reasons

A blueprint is a plan. It lets the builder know that the foyer will be here, the living room will be to the east, the dining room to the west, and the family room will be north.

The blueprint of an essay permits you to see the whole shape of your ideas before you start churning out whole paragraphs.

While it's okay for you to start writing down your ideas before you have a clear sense of your blueprint, your reader should never encounter a list of details without being told exactly what point these details are supposed to support. (See: [Blueprinting](#).)

Black Elk Speaks accurately represents Indian lifestyle by *its attention to cultural detail, its use of Indian words, and its direct quotes from Black Elk*.

In the blueprint, the author **signals an intention to support the precise opinion**. The author of the example above introduces three different kinds of evidence:

- cultural details
- Indian words

- quotes from Black Elk.

Informed by this blueprint, the reader expects to encounter one section (a paragraph or more) devoted to each subtopic.

The **blueprint determines the shape of your paper.**

If your thesis statement introduces three reasons, the reader will expect a section on reason 1, a section on reason 2, and a section on reason 3. For a single paragraph, you might only spend one sentence on each reason. For a 2-3 page paper, each reason might get its own paragraph. For a 10-page paper, each reason might contain its own local thesis statement, with its own list of reasons, so that each section involves several paragraphs.

To emphasize the structure of your essay, **repeat keywords or paraphrased ideas from the blueprint** as you introduce the sections in which you expand on each point. Crafting good transitions is a skill that takes time and practice. ([See Transitions and Reminders of Thesis](#)).

Note: If you repeat your blueprint phrases and your thesis statement robotically ("The third point I want to talk about is how *Black Elk Speaks* accurately represents the Indian lifestyle through its direct quotes from Black Elk."), your writing will be rather dry and lifeless. **Dull writing is probably better than aimless rambling**, although neither is terribly effective. |

Note: A thesis statement amounts to nothing if the paper is not **completely focused on that main point**. Blueprinting helps create the coherency of the thesis throughout the entire essay, which makes it a necessary part of the thesis statement.

17 Oct 2000 -- originally posted by Nicci Jordan, UWEC Junior

08 Dec 2000 -- first posted here. Maintained by Prof. Jerz.

13 Dec 2003 -- links updated

22 Sep 2006 -- moderate revisions by Jerz

Related Links

Nicci Jordan

[Blueprinting: Planning Your Essay](#)

A blueprint is a rough but specific **plan**, or outline, which defines the structure of your whole essay. The blueprint, usually located within the thesis statement, is a brief list of the points you plan to make, compressed into just a few words each, in the same order in which they appear in the body of your paper.

Hochstein, Jordan, and Jerz

[Thesis Reminders](#)

A thesis reminder is a direct **echo of the thesis statement**. In a short paper, the topic sentence of each paragraph should repeat words or phrases from the thesis statement.

Dennis G. Jerz

[Timed Essays: Planning and Organizing in a Crunch](#)

Some students are so worried about filling up the page that they just open up the valve and let the B.S. flow. Remember, your instructor will read your essay, not weigh it.

 [Subscribe to this blog's feed](#)



Category Tags

> [Resources](#) > [Writing](#) > [Academic](#) > Thesis Statements

Search Site

[Subscribe to this site's feed](#)

[\[What is this?\]](#)

[Powered by Movable Type 4.1](#)

[D.G. Jerz](#) > [Resources](#) > [Writing](#) > [Academic](#) > Thesis Statements