

Creating Effective Thesis Statements and Topic Sentences Foundation Lesson

About this Lesson

Perhaps no other writing skill is as fundamental as the ability to write a clear thesis statement and to back up a thesis with evidence and support. Teachers may choose to use this lesson at the beginning of the school year to enable their students to write arguable, understandable thesis statements that clarify the author’s purpose and that provide a focus for the student’s writing.

This lesson is included in Module 4: From Journal to Essay.

Objectives

Students will

- demonstrate an understanding of the essential elements of a thesis statement.
- demonstrate an understanding of how to answer the abstract question of a writing prompt.
- write an effective thesis statement.
- demonstrate an understanding of the essential elements of a topic sentence.
- identify appropriate topic sentences to support a thesis statement.
- write effective topic sentences.

Level

Grades Six through Ten

Connection to Common Core Standards for English Language Arts

LTF® Foundation Lessons are designed to be used across grade levels and therefore are aligned to the CCSS Anchor Standards. Teachers should consult their own grade-level-specific Standards. The activities in this lesson allow teachers to address the following Common Core Standards:

Explicitly addressed in this lesson

Code	Standard	Level of Thinking	Depth of Knowledge
W.2	Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.	Create	III
W.4	Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.	Create	III
W.5	Develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, revising, editing, rewriting, or trying a new approach	Evaluate	III

W.10	Write routinely over extended time frames (time for research, reflection, and revision) and shorter time frames (a single sitting or a day or two) for a range of tasks, purposes, and audiences.	Apply	III
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Implicitly addressed in this lesson

Code	Standard	Level of Thinking	Depth of Knowledge
R.1	Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it. Cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.	Understand	III
R.2	Determine central ideas or themes of a text and analyze their development; summarize the key supporting details and ideas.	Analyze	III
R.4	Interpret words and phrases as they are used in a text, including determining technical, connotative, and figurative meanings, and analyze how specific word choices shape meaning or tone.	Analyze	III
R.10	Read and comprehend complex literary and informational texts independently and proficiently.	Understand	II
L.1	Demonstrate command of the conventions of standard English grammar and usage when writing or speaking.	Understand	I
L.2	Demonstrate command of the conventions of standard English capitalization, punctuation, and spelling when writing.	Understand	I

LTF Skill Focus

The foundation for LTF English lessons is the Skill Progression Chart that identifies key skills for each domain, beginning with grade 6 and adding more complex skills at each subsequent grade level while reinforcing skills introduced at previous grade levels. The Skill Focus for each individual lesson identifies the skills actually addressed in that lesson.

Levels of Thinking		
Remember	Understand	Apply
Analyze	Evaluate	Create
Close Reading <i>written, spoken, and visual texts</i>		Grammar <i>purposeful use of language for effect</i>
Composition <i>written, spoken, and visual products</i>		
Reading Strategies Determining Author's Purpose Literary Elements Tone tone determined through diction, imagery, detail		Types (modes) Expository analytical Structural Elements Introduction thesis Organization Patterns (spatial, order of importance, chronological, etc.)

Connections to AP*

All effective essays written for AP exams should begin with strong, clear thesis sentences, which clarify for the reader the purpose and direction of the essay. The organization of the essay can be enhanced by focused topic sentences that support the thesis.

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Materials and Resources

- copies of Student Activity
- handout: thesis statement template (in teaching suggestions)

Assessments

The following kinds of formative assessments are embedded in this lesson:

- evaluation activities
- guided questions
- writing activities

Teaching Suggestions

This is an extensive lesson that should probably be taught over a period of time rather than in one or two class periods. Throughout the year, teachers should refer to the concepts in this lesson and have students practice creating thesis statements related to the texts they read in class.

Included in Activity 6 of the Student Activity is a thesis statement template that students can use when learning to write effective thesis statements. Teachers may want to project this template or copy it and have students put it in their English notebooks. Teachers could also make a poster of the template to hang in their classrooms as a reference for students.

Answers

Answers for this lesson are subjective and will vary. To obtain the maximum benefit of the lesson, ask students to go beyond the expected responses.

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Thesis Statements

What is a thesis statement?

A **thesis statement** is a sentence that expresses the writer's position/opinion on a particular subject. It is reasonable for the reader of a thesis statement to assume that it will be supported by evidence.

A *thesis* expresses an idea that the speaker or writer intends to support or “prove.” The speaker or writer begins with an idea that he or she believes may be correct. The purpose of a speech or essay may be to justify a thesis by using evidence presented in a logical order. When the writer forms his or her idea into a sentence that will serve as the cornerstone of a piece of writing, we call this sentence the **thesis statement**. The structure and content of the thesis statement will be shaped according to the author's purpose.

How do I write a thesis statement?

There are really two ways to approach writing a thesis statement. One way is to start by making an assertion (an idea of your own that must be supported by evidence) and then to weigh the facts and evidence that may or may not support that assertion. When you create a preliminary thesis statement this way, you often have to change your thesis because the evidence may not necessarily support your position. The other way is to examine the available data or text, interpret it, and then form your thesis statement based on what you have discovered through your study of the data.

Each method has its pros and cons. Your individual thinking style will most likely influence the way you choose to produce your thesis statement.

How do I write a literary analysis thesis statement?

Though you *can* start simply by reading a text and writing a statement explaining some aspect of its meaning, then searching for quotations and details that support your ideas, it is really easier to begin with quotations and details from the text itself, writing interpretations of these pieces of the text and searching for connections and contrasts among them.

- As you are reading the text, highlight interesting and important words, phrases, images, and passages, looking for **patterns** among these elements. In the margins, write questions and observations on which you can later base commentary.
- As you complete sections of the text, use dialectical journals to help you select and analyze important parts of the text (see “Dialectical Journal” lesson for format).
- After you have completed your reading, browse through your annotations and journal observations. Then write a generalization about the text (thesis statement), using a variation of the format at the end of this lesson.

Writing Literary Analysis Thesis Statements

A thesis statement usually appears in the first paragraph of an essay and reveals the opinion that your paper will defend.

An analytical writing prompt asks you to prove an abstract idea by referring to concrete evidence.

In order to write a literary **thesis** statement you must have

- 1) a **subject**—usually the **abstract** portion of the writing prompt, such as characterization, tone, theme, mood, etc.
- 2) **your opinion** about that subject
- 3) **the concrete element**—the literary device(s) that provide evidence to support your opinion.

An effective thesis statement makes an assertion about what the writer believes to be true about the abstract portion of the prompt. Because the assertion is the writer's opinion, the writer must offer evidence to back up the assertion. The thesis statement lets the reader of the essay know from the very beginning what the writer intends to prove in his or her essay.

Here is a sample prompt for which you might write a thesis statement:

Read the passage carefully. In a well-written essay, explain how the author uses imagery, figurative language, and detail to characterize Scrooge.

Note: You must **answer the questions of the prompt**; however, DO NOT just reword the prompt.

What are the questions of this prompt?

1. *What kind of character is Scrooge? (the abstract)*
2. *What literary elements reveal that characterization? (the concrete)*
3. *What is your opinion about Scrooge's character?*

Here is a thesis statement that is typical of many beginning writers:

In *A Christmas Carol* by Charles Dickens, the author uses many different types of figurative language to characterize Scrooge.

- 1) What is the subject (the abstract element)? characterization of Scrooge in A Christmas Carol
- 2) What literary elements (the concrete) reveal that characterization? figurative language
- 3) What is the writer's opinion about Scrooge's character? This key element of a thesis is missing; there is no opinion given. This thesis simply restates the writing prompt.

Here is a thesis statement that **answers** the questions of the prompt:

In *A Christmas Carol* by Charles Dickens, the protagonist Scrooge is portrayed as the archetypal greedy, cold-hearted character through Dickens' use of figurative language, such as similes and metaphors.

- 1) What is the subject (the abstract element)? characterization of Scrooge in A Christmas Carol
- 2) What literary elements (the concrete) reveal that characterization? figurative language
- 3) What is the writer's opinion about Scrooge's character? This writer answers the abstract part of the prompt by stating that Scrooge is greedy and cold-hearted.

Activity One: Evaluation of Thesis Statements

Read the following sample thesis statements, and then identify from the thesis statement the subject and the writer's opinion. Write one sentence that specifically explains what makes each an effective thesis statement.

Poetry prompt:

Read the following poem carefully. Then, in a well-organized essay, analyze how the speaker uses literary techniques to reveal his attitude toward the subject of the poem.

In Holy Sonnet X, Donne's use of personification and mocking comparisons clearly reveal his disdainful attitude toward death.

- 1) What is the subject (the abstract element)? _____
- 2) What literary elements (concrete) reveal that abstract element? _____
- 3) What is the writer's opinion about the subject? _____

This thesis statement is effective because _____

Prose prompt:

Read carefully the excerpt below, in which the speaker tries to explain his actions to his children. Then, in a well-developed essay, explain how the speaker's language clearly reveals his attitude toward what he is doing.

In the excerpt from Harper Lee's To Kill a Mockingbird, Atticus' strong diction and religious references reveal his belief that his defense of Tom Robinson is both moral and mandatory.

- 1) What is the subject (the abstract element)? _____
- 2) What literary elements (concrete) reveal that abstract element? _____

3) What is the writer's opinion about the subject? _____

This thesis statement is effective because _____

Activity Two: How to Evaluate Literary Analysis Thesis Statements

In the prompts and thesis statements below, cross out the words in the thesis that are taken directly from the prompt. Examine what is left. Does it answer the abstract question of the prompt (which is always going to be a "what" question)? Some of the answers have been provided for you.

1. Prompt: Read the passage carefully. In a well-written essay, explain how the author uses imagery, figurative language, and detail to characterize Scrooge.

What is the abstract question? WHAT kind of character is Scrooge? _____

Thesis: In *A Christmas Carol* by Charles Dickens, ~~the author uses~~ many different types of figurative language to characterize Scrooge.

What is the answer to the question? *"Many different types" does not tell what kind of character Scrooge is, so this prompt does not answer the abstract question.* _____

2. Prompt: Write an essay in which you analyze how Melville uses imagery to reveal the meaning of the work as a whole.

What is the abstract question? WHAT _____ ?

Thesis: In *Moby Dick*, Herman Melville uses the image of the white whale to reveal the contradictory nature of evil.

What is the answer to the question? *That evil is contradictory* _____

3. Prompt: Write an essay in which you explain how the poet uses language to create tone.

What is the abstract question? WHAT _____ ?

Thesis: In the poem "Jabberwocky" by Lewis Carroll, the poet uses scary-sounding nonsense words to create an ominous yet humorous tone.

What is the answer to the question? _____

4. Prompt: Write an essay in which you explain how the author uses figurative language to reveal her view of man's relationship with nature.

What is the abstract question? WHAT _____ ?

Thesis: In *Anne of Green Gables*, L.M. Montgomery personifies trees, lakes, and other elements of nature to suggest the friendship that can develop between people and the natural world.

What is the answer to the question? _____

Activity Three: Writing a Literary Analysis Thesis Statement

Read the following poem by John Masefield. Then fill in the blanks to complete the literary analysis thesis statements that follow it. Make sure each statement includes an opinion.

Sea-Fever

I must go down to the seas again, to the lonely sea and the sky,
And all I ask is a tall ship and a star to steer her by;
And the wheel's kick and the wind's song and the white sail's shaking,
And a gray mist on the sea's face, and a gray dawn breaking.

I must go down to the seas again, for the call of the running tide
Is a wild call and a clear call that cannot be denied,
And all I ask is a windy day with the white clouds flying,
And the flung spray and the blown spume and the sea gulls crying.

I must go down to the seas again, to the vagrant gypsy life,
To the gull's way and the whale's way, where the wind's like a whetted¹ knife;
And all I ask is a merry yarn² from a laughing fellow-rover,
And quiet sleep and a sweet dream when the long trick's over.

¹**whetted:** sharpened

²**yarn:** story

1. In the poem "Sea-Fever," John Masefield uses images connected with _____ to create a _____ tone.
2. In the poem "Sea-Fever," John Masefield uses sound devices such as _____ to convey the exhilaration and energy of a windy day at sea.
3. In the poem "Sea-Fever," the author's choice of adjectives conveys feelings of _____ and _____.
4. In the poem "Sea-Fever," John Masefield creates a sense of adventurous freedom by using _____.
5. In the poem "Sea-Fever," John Masefield _____ by using _____ to reveal/convey/portray _____.

Based on one of the thesis statements above, write an appropriate prompt:

Read the poem carefully. Then write an essay in which you explain _____

Topic Sentences

What is a topic sentence, and how does it relate to a thesis statement?

A **topic sentence** explains or introduces one of the major points that support the writer's thesis statement. Each body paragraph in an essay must contain a topic sentence that connects all of the information and analysis in that paragraph to one unified idea, and each topic sentence must be related directly to the thesis statement. The main ideas expressed in each topic sentence represent the major divisions of the essay. Writing those topic sentences before beginning to write the essay will help developing writers organize their essays and keep those essays focused on their thesis statements.

Activity Four: Selecting Topic Sentences

Here is a possible thesis statement for a literary analysis essay over "Sea-Fever," followed by some possible topic sentences for this essay. Read each of the sentences carefully. Then place a check mark beside the two that **best** relate to the thesis statement.

In the poem "Sea-Fever," John Masefield reveals his complex attitude toward sailing by using diction, imagery, and figurative language to convey the lonely but exciting life of a sailor.

_____ Throughout the poem, speaker reveals the loneliness of the life of a sailor.

_____ Masefield's use of alliteration reflects his desire to return to the sea.

_____ The poem is divided into three four-line stanzas.

_____ The excitement and adventure of the sea create a call that is irresistible to the speaker.

_____ The speaker says that "I must go down to the seas again."

_____ The sound devices of the poem intensify the excitement of the sea.

Write one additional topic sentence that relates to the thesis statement above.

Activity Five: Writing Topic Sentences

Following is a possible thesis statement for an essay over “Sea-Fever.” Read the sentence carefully. Then write two possible topic sentences for this essay.

In his poem “Sea-Fever,” John Masefield uses figurative language to convey his close relationship with the sea and his attraction to the sailing life.

1)

2)

Here is another possible thesis statement for an essay over “Sea-Fever.” Read the sentence carefully. Then write two possible topic sentences for this essay.

In his poem “Sea-Fever,” John Masefield uses emotional diction to reveal his strong feelings about the sea.

1)

2)

Extending the Lesson

Following is a fill-in-the-blank template that will help you write a thesis statement to respond to any analytical writing prompt:

In		,		USES
	(title of work)		(author's name)	
		to		
	(diction, imagery, detail, figurative language, etc.—the concrete)		(Marker Verb—reveal, explore, portray, convey, suggest)	
	(the abstract—tone, theme, purpose—the writer's opinion about the subject that must be proven)			