How to write a good thesis statement

The key to writing a good thesis statement is learning how to take sides. The previous sentence represents a decent example of thesis statement, because it offers a debatable interpretation. A good essay would then proceed to support the statement with facts and examples. A great essay would go further, anticipating objections to the thesis and explaining why various alternatives had not been accepted. Since this handout is not an essay, however, you won't see that effort presented here, but what follows are a series of examples that illustrate how you might craft an appropriate thesis statement, especially for a history paper or critical essay.

Bad Example:
John Adams was the second president of the United States.
- *A factual statement is not an interpretative argument*

Mediocre Example:
John Adams was a great American.
- *This is an opinion and therefore an interpretation, but it is vague and unoriginal.*

Marginal Example:
John Adams was a failure.
- *Here is a thesis statement that takes sides, but it sounds more like the opening of a lawyer's brief or partisan hatchet job than a scholarly interpretation.*

Better Example:
By his own standards, John Adams was a failure.
- *What makes this thesis statement sound more promising is the suggestion that the author can use Adams's own words to critique his actions. It also modifies the sweeping judgment of the previous example just enough to suggest a more even-handed approach.*

Best Example:
By his own standards, John Adams failed to exhibit the ideals of "republican virtue" in his often-strained relationship with Benjamin Franklin.
- *This thesis statement takes sides in an important Revolutionary-era dispute in a manner that suggests a sophisticated examination of language and primary source texts. What should follow is a definition of republican virtue, a careful critique of Adams's views on the matter, and a chronology of his disputes with Franklin that demonstrates why he was guiltier of hypocrisy than Franklin.*