

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:

Henry Adams called himself a “failure” in *The Education of Henry Adams*.

A factual statement is not an interpretative argument and represents a failed thesis.

Mediocre Examples:

Henry Adams was not really a failure.

Henry Adams was not only a failure, but also a fake and a hypocrite.

These are statements are opinions and therefore interpretations, but they are either vague and unoriginal or just too strongly worded. Taking sides successfully means more than just having an opinion; it requires reasoned argument.

Better Example:

By his own standards, Henry Adams was a failure in his relationships.

What makes this thesis statement more promising is the suggestion that the author can use Adams's own words to critique a specific set of his actions. But it is still quite broad.

Best Example:

Henry Adams often used the word “failure” or its variations in *The Education*, but he meant unfinished, not defeated, a fact illustrated by his overwhelming yet ever-evolving success as a college professor.

This thesis statement suggests a sophisticated focus on the text and how to decode its meanings by using comparisons between Adams's memory of his life and his actual experiences. It also takes sides in an important interpretive debate that has engaged scholars for decades.