

## Essay Planning: How to Develop a Working Thesis Statement

The working thesis statement is the seed from which your argument grows as you plan your essay. It is the working draft of the thesis that will appear in your final paper. It allows you, the writer, to go through the process of focusing, brainstorming, and ordering information as you work toward a statement that will not only convey to the audience the theme of the essay but also allow you to organize your thoughts and predict body paragraphs.

The working thesis will vary depending on the subject and the type of writing in which you are engaged: the thesis for a business report is quite different from a thesis for a personal essay. However, the thesis for both of these types of essay will ultimately provide a road map of the paper and help the writer decide how and what to write. It establishes, and even helps you develop, the claim(s) the essay will support.

### *Sample Prompt*

Many societies believe that the pursuit of happiness is a fundamental human right, but it is also true that attainment of happiness remains elusive. Perhaps Bertrand Russell had it right when he said, "To be without some of the things you want is an indispensable part of happiness." What gives us more pleasure and satisfaction: the pursuit of our desires or the attainment of them?

*Write a personal essay in which you draw on your own experience, observation, and reading to discuss your answer to the question posed by the prompt. An effective essay will construct an argument that accounts for the complexity of the opening truth statement even as it weighs specific examples of pursuit and attainment to arrive at its conclusion.*

As the paper evolves through the drafting stage, the thesis will also evolve, but the working thesis you develop using the process outlined in this handout will help you to build a strong thesis even before you draft.

### **Developing a Working Thesis Statement**

Developing a solid thesis statement takes time. It begins with reading and responding to a prompt or assignment to develop a basic claim, brainstorming the supporting arguments for that claim, creating a solid argumentative framework for the paper, and even predicting how you will conclude the essay.

### ***Reading and Responding to a Prompt or Assignment to Develop a Basic Claim***

A thesis is the central claim of your paper—the one statement that all other ideas and information in the essay aims to prove, so in its most basic form, the thesis statement must make a claim.

First, carefully read and analyze the prompt. As you read the prompt, you should look for key words and phrases that identify the ideas you are asked to address, that define the type of essay you are to produce, and that spell out the kinds of information that will count as evidence.

*Working Thesis Statement, First Draft*

The pursuit of one's desires provides people with more pleasure and satisfaction than the attainment of them.

This first draft makes a basic claim that directly answers the question posed by the prompt—a claim that can be developed by examining readings, observation, and personal experience. However, it does not suggest the kinds of evidence or the type of development that the paper will present, so there is more work to be done.

*Brainstorming the Supporting Arguments to Refine Your Claim*

Again, review the prompt and check for specific requirements for the essay. Remember that all information and ideas should relate directly to the essay topic. If the prompt lists subtopics to include, consider using them for your body paragraphs. If the prompt does not specify the subtopics, you will need to generate a list of main supporting ideas. In either case, you should incorporate in your thesis the terms that you will use in your paper.

*Working Thesis Statement, Second Draft*

The thrill of pursuing happiness, the experiences along the way, and the knowledge that comes from trial and error provide people with more pleasure and satisfaction than the mere attainment of desires.

This draft now has several subtopics incorporated in it. This paper will use the thrill of pursuing happiness, the experiences from the pursuit, and the knowledge from those experiences as separate topics to support the main assertion.

*Creating a Solid Argumentative Framework for Your Paper*

After you have a detailed thesis and supporting points, decide upon how you will argue these claims. Remember that you must present your points in a way that removes the preconceptions your audience may have. Consider the opposite side of whatever argument you will make; unless your paper presents a summary of research of a topic, you must clearly state your point-of-view. Be prepared to support your claims with details and facts.

*Working Thesis Statement, Third Draft*

The thrill of pursuing happiness, the experiences along the way, and the knowledge that comes from trial and error provide people with more pleasure and satisfaction than the mere attainment of desires, despite the common perception that attainment is the final goal.

By using subtopics and the main assertion, this paper will argue that the common perception is incorrect. To prove this point, it will use the body paragraphs to argue each of the supporting claims. In each of these paragraphs, one of the subtopics will be presented in a way that supports the claim that there is more to life than achieving goals.

*Predicting How You Will Conclude Your Paper*

Your thesis statement defines the central argument of your paper; your conclusion draws on the discussion and evidence in the body to support that argument. You may, for instance, conclude by re-emphasizing the points you made in your paper or by giving your audience a call to action. Your concluding strategy will depend on your audience, purpose, and the type of paper you are writing.

*Working Thesis Statement, Fourth Draft*

The thrill of pursuing happiness, the experiences along the way, and the knowledge that comes from trial and error provide people with more pleasure and satisfaction than the mere attainment of desires, despite the common perception that attainment is the final goal; however, attaining desires does provide some happiness.

This essay will most likely conclude by offering a compromise with the audience. Instead of claiming that pursuing desires is the only source of happiness, the paper will admit that attaining desires does bring some happiness, just not as much as pursuing desires.

**Activity**

Follow the steps above to construct a working thesis statement for the following prompt.

Describe in an essay the most important person in your life. Explain how he or she became that person and what he or she has done to remain the most important person in your life. Use first-hand experience and events to demonstrate the relevance of this person and his or her continuing impact on your life.

*Answer Key for Activity*

Possible working thesis statement:

The most important person in my life is my father because he has been my idol my entire life; has never made me doubt his strength, discipline, or courage; and has always done what is best for me and my family.