

Thesis guidelines

The thesis of an essay is the main historical point that its writer is trying to prove. A history essay can be no better than its thesis. If the argument that the writer is making is ill-reasoned, historically inaccurate, or simply unclear, no amount of literary finesse can save it. The examples below show how one can develop a thesis, from an initial idea to a full historical argument. Following the examples are some guidelines on how to most clearly state a thesis in an essay.

Assignment: How and why did Anne Hutchinson pose a threat to the established structures of power and authority in Puritan Massachusetts?

Not a thesis:

In this paper I will discuss how Anne Hutchinson posed a threat to the established structures of power and authority in Puritan Massachusetts.

Also not a thesis:

Anne Hutchinson posed a threat to the Puritan leadership in the Massachusetts colony.

These will not work because a thesis is not merely a general subject for a paper or a restatement of the question, but should instead be a specific point that one could either argue for or against.

A rough draft thesis:

Anne Hutchinson posed a threat to the power and authority of the Puritan leadership because she was a woman, a popular preacher, and because of her religious convictions.

A second draft thesis:

The leaders of the Puritan community in Massachusetts not only felt uneasy about Anne Hutchinson's role as a public figure, but were further threatened by her belief that individuals could communicate directly with God.

This is more specific than any of the attempts above, but it still lacks analysis. The writer needs to delve beneath the facts of this case and ask "why?"

A good thesis:

While many Puritan leaders were uneasy about the involvement of women outside the traditional female sphere, Anne Hutchinson's preaching that every individual had the ability to communicate directly with God posed a threat to the ecclesiastical hierarchy in Massachusetts which based its power and authority on its role as mediator between the congregation.

This is a workable thesis because it offers an explanation for how events came to pass as they did. It would be easy enough to show *that* people were threatened by Anne Hutchison. Your task as an historian is to find out *how* and *why* that was so.

Thesis Statements

A short essay should contain a thesis statement in its first paragraph. The thesis statement lets the reader know, as soon as possible, what argument the paper will make. A thesis statement may require more than one sentence to make. In deciding where to place the thesis statement and how to introduce it, consider what a typical UW student would need to know to understand your thesis.

A good thesis statement will probably have these characteristics:

- It is clearly and forcefully supported by the rest of the paper, and all of the evidence pertains to it.
- It is precise, and can be understood on its own, before one has read the essay.
- It is precise, and not so general and vague that it does not express an arguable position.