Formulating a Thesis Statement

**What is a Thesis Statement?**

A thesis is your statement of purpose. It is the claim you wish to make in your paper, the point you wish to convince your reader of. You support your thesis statement through your discussion and examples, and then conclude how what you have presented supports your thesis statement.

A thesis statement must be reasonably debatable. There is something debatable about almost any topic. Instructors don’t want to hear you parrot back information about a given topic. They want to hear your take on that topic.

A thesis statement will:

- test your ideas by distilling them into a sentence or two
- organize and develop your argument
- provide your reader with a "guide" to your argument

**Ways to Build a Thesis Statement**

Sometimes as you narrow your topic, your thesis will suggest itself. At other times you have to do some work to figure out what it is. Here are some ways to build a thesis statement.

**Define something.** Do people have different opinions about exactly what something is?

*Organic architecture is....(fill in the blank)*

This is a broad subject and many people (including many famous architects) have had different takes on it. What is yours?

** Debate whether something is true or false, good or bad.** Different people often view the same issue from different sides.

*Urban renewal in the 1960s helped redevelop Boston and turn it into the world-class city it is today.*

*Urban renewal in the 1960s drove 1000s of Bostonians from their homes, and turned the West End into the sterile wasteland it is today.*

**Debate how information is interpreted.**

*An increasing number of urban professionals are moving back into the city, indicating dissatisfaction with suburban life.*

*The rush of urban professionals back into the city indicates a rediscovery of the conveniences of city living.*
Consider cause and effect. Ask yourself why something has happened and set out to explain why.

*Last year was the warmest year on record, thus clearly indicating global warming is a growing problem.*

*Last year was the warmest year on record because of the effects of El Nino.*

*Last year was the warmest year on record, but one year doesn’t indicate a trend; more research must be done about the earth’s atmosphere and weather.*

Policy. What should be done about something? Make a call for action.

*Cities must allow for more open space and buildings that work better with their surroundings.*

*Architects must value service over all else when designing a building, even if this means compromising their own design integrity.*

Potential Problems with Thesis Statements

Don’t make your thesis statement too factual.

*Boston’s Government Center is built on the site of old Scollay Square.*

The above statement is a truth. There is nothing debatable about it. You have left yourself nothing to prove.

Don’t make your thesis statement too broad.

*Due to suburban sprawl, the American suburb is actually bad for people.*

While this point is debatable, you could write an entire book on this topic (in fact, many people have). It’s generally better to say more about less. A tighter focus will make it easier on you and the reader.

*The isolation and impersonality of contemporary suburbia is having a negative effect on an entire generation, as they grow up disconnected with everything and everyone around them.*

Don’t make your thesis statement too vague.

*Many modern buildings are ugly.*

While this point is debatable as well, the language is abstract and unclear. Improve on statements like this by providing more concrete ideas:

*A cement monstrosity such as Boston City Hall, while well-intentioned, is a destructive force on the architecture landscape, and negatively affects a large section of downtown Boston.*
How to Tell a Strong Thesis Statement from a Weak One:

A strong thesis statement takes a stand.

If you are writing a paper on William McDounough, you might write either of these two thesis statements:

William McDounough argues that modern architecture is boring.

This is a weak thesis. First, it fails to take a stand. Second, the phrase "modern architecture is boring" is vague.

William McDounough asserts that modern architecture is unsuccessful because it fails to meaningfully respond to the physical environment in which it is situated.

This is a strong thesis because it takes a stand.

A strong thesis statement justifies discussion.

Your thesis should indicate the point of the discussion. If your assignment is to write a paper on Robert Venturi's mission as an architect, you might write either of these two statements:

Robert Venturi's work is based on the belief that modern architecture failed to satisfy the public.

This is a weak thesis because it states an observation. Your reader won't be able to tell the point of the statement.

Robert Venturi's work is based on his belief that modern architecture failed to satisfy the public because of its lack of readily apparent symbolism.

This is a strong thesis because it not only makes a statement, but also because it provides a "because" statement that prompts readers to think about your reasoning. Readers will be interested to see how you support your point.

A strong thesis statement expresses one main idea.

Readers need to be able to see that your paper has one main point. If your thesis expresses more than one idea, then you might confuse your readers about the subject of your paper. For example:

Fumihiko Maki's typical spare modernist aesthetic is derived from traditional Japanese symbolism, and was very popular with the American public.

This is a weak thesis statement because the reader can't decide whether the paper is about Japanese aesthetics or the American public. To revise the thesis, the relationship between the two ideas needs to become more clear. One way to revise the thesis would be to write:
At the time Fumihiko Maki was designing, the American public was fascinated with Japanese art and design. Since his spare modernist aesthetic relied on Japanese aesthetics to express urban interaction and landscape symbolism, Maki's work was very popular with American audiences.

This is a strong thesis because it shows that the two ideas are related. Hint: a great many clear and engaging thesis statements contain words like "because," "since," "so," "although," "unless," and "however."

A strong thesis statement is specific.

A thesis statement should show exactly what your paper will be about, and will help you keep your paper to a manageable topic. For example, if you write a paper on Alvar Aalto:

*Alvar Aalto's work is closely related to nature.*

This is a weak thesis statement because "closely related to nature" is vague. You should be able to identify specific ways that his work is close to nature. A revised thesis might look like this:

*Alvar Aalto's works integrate nature and man-made environments in order to achieve his ideal of architecture's organic wholeness.*

This is a strong thesis because it narrows the subject to a more specific and manageable topic and it also identifies the specific relationship between Aalto's work and nature.

Adapted from:
http://www.indiana.edu/~iucdp/e103p1/thesis.html and