Thesis Statements and Topic Sentences

A *thesis driven essay* is comprised of an initial thesis statement that establishes a claim or argument, and ensuing topic sentences that support and develop that claim. Ideally, a reader would be able to read only the thesis statement and topic sentences of your text, and still be able to understand the main ideas and logical progression of your argument.

WHAT IS A THESIS STATEMENT?

- A thesis statement *asserts the main claim or argument of your paper*.
- A thesis statement also often *previews* the structure of the rest of the essay in a way that corresponds with the body paragraphs (see example C).
- A strong thesis statement makes a complex and unique argument that someone could reasonably object to; the rest of the essay should then defend that argument.
  - » For instance, "Andrew Carnegie was extremely wealthy" is not a sufficiently insightful thesis statement because it is neither complex nor objectionable.

WHERE ARE THEY LOCATED?

- Thesis statements often appear as the last sentence/s of your introductory paragraph or section. **
- A thesis statement can appear as one sentence (see examples C and D) or several sentences (see examples A and B); this is dependent on the requirements of your rhetorical context.
  - ** *Note: these are general guidelines for constructing a strong thesis statement and topic sentences in a thesis driven essay; always refer to your assignment or sample text from your field for specific expectations about the role and placement of a thesis statement.*

WHAT IS A TOPIC SENTENCE?

- A topic sentence is the first sentence of a paragraph that signals to the reader what the paragraph's main idea will be.
- Topic sentences should:
  - » relate back to the argument of the thesis;
  - » concisely summarize the key idea of the paragraph;
  - » can even contain key words from the thesis statement.

TOPIC SENTENCES AND COMPREHENSION

- Topic sentences can help you with paragraph cohesion. Each paragraph should have one unique main idea that develops a facet of the thesis statement, and that main idea should be unified in one paragraph – not spread throughout the essay.
- Topic sentences have been shown to help readers recall the content of the text because they prepare readers for the ensuing ideas of the paragraph.
- Topic sentences often follow the "old/new contract" (see handout) and link back to what was established in the previous paragraph.

See D'Angelo, Frank J. "The Topic Sentence Revisited." College Composition and Carmmunication 37.4 (1986): 431-441.

Example A

On one level, Ondaatje's "The Cinnamon Peeler" shows a man who desires total ownership and possession of a woman, while at the same time it seems to suggest that this desire is an impossible fantasy. The poem implies that lust is neither as powerful nor all-encompassing as it might first seem.

Example B

Teaching Intelligent Design is poor curriculum and potentially destructive to our nation's schools and children. Children would suddenly be unprotected from the law retaining the separation of church and state, be introduced to a fact-free discipline that bases itself in faith instead of factual science, and be subjected to even more curriculum in an already jam-packed schedule.

Example C

Thesis Statement: Andrew Carnegie's (A) contributions to U.S. manufacturing, personal financial success, and philanthropy often overshadow (B) the tense working conditions, (C) poor wages, and (D) strained labor relations between the steel magnate and the people whose hard work enabled him to spend lavishly.

Topic Sentence A: Andrew Carnegie's innovative approach to steel production helped him amass an unprecedented personal fortune from which he could pursue many philanthropic endeavors.

Topic Sentence B: Those things for which he is best known *[old]*, however, often overshadow the tense working conditions that his workers had to endure *[new]*.

Topic Sentence C: In addition to tense working conditions [old], Carnegie has been criticized for paying his workers inadequate wages [new].

Topic Sentence D: Low wages and harsh working conditions [old] strained labor relations between Carnegie and the people whose hard work enabled him to spend lavishly on philanthropy [new].

Example D

Stigmatization of the mentally ill is caused by the public's belief in myths about the dangerousness of the mentally ill, and exposing those myths can reduce stigmatization.

If you are having trouble constructing a thesis statement or topic sentences, make an appointment at the Global Communication Center and a tutor will assist you.