

B STYLE: Introductory Paragraphs and Thesis Statements

1 Read the introductory paragraph below. Then discuss the questions that follow.

Should a garbage man be paid the same salary as a college professor? Most people would consider this to be a foolish question. They would immediately answer “No!” because one does physical labor and the other engages in mental labor. Society teaches us to respect and reward one type of work more than another. This kind of thinking was exactly what the founders of Brook Farm were reacting against when they started their utopian experiment in the 1840s. Because the dignity of all human beings was of paramount importance to them, they believed that no matter what kind of work a person did, everyone’s contribution to society was of equal value. As a result, all Brook Farm residents received the same wages. Nevertheless, despite these good intentions, Brook Farm failed because of its residents’ lack of capital in a world unfavorable to generosity.

1. How does the writer attract the reader’s attention in the first sentence?
2. How do you think the ideas develop throughout the paragraph: from the general to the specific? from the specific to the general?
3. Which sentence tells the reader what the writer will focus on in the body of the essay?

Introductory Paragraphs

An essay is composed of an introduction, a body, and a conclusion. In the introductory paragraph the author writes a statement to attract the reader’s attention. This statement is the first of the paragraph’s general statements, which introduce the general topic of the essay. There are many ways the writer can spark the reader’s interest: with a question, a humorous remark, a shocking statement.

The flow of ideas in the paragraph goes from the general (large, broad ideas) to the specific (details, examples, particular cases). The most specific statement is the thesis statement, which is usually the last sentence of the paragraph.

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Thesis Statements

The **thesis statement** communicates the main idea of the essay. It reflects the writer's narrow focus and point of view, attitude, or opinion, and it also forecasts which aspects of the subject the writer will discuss to support the thesis in the body of the essay. A good thesis statement should have all of the criteria mentioned above.

The thesis statement is not a statement of fact, nor is it a statement that simply announces the general topic of the essay.

Utopias are visions of perfect political or social systems.

THIS IS NOT A THESIS STATEMENT.

It states a fact; no point of view is given.

I am going to write about utopias.

THIS IS NOT A THESIS STATEMENT.

It only announces the general topic.

Reading about utopias can be valuable.

THIS IS NOT A THESIS STATEMENT.

Although it gives us the writer's point of view, there is no focus here. What exactly makes reading about utopias "valuable"?

Reading about utopias can be valuable because what we learn from books can help us to deal with the social, economic, and moral problems of contemporary life.

THIS IS A THESIS STATEMENT.

It explains why the writer believes reading about utopias can be valuable. The writer will most likely explain this in three body paragraphs dealing with:

1. social problems
2. economic problems
3. moral problems

2 Read the following sentences of an introduction to an essay. Put the sentences in order. Using **1** for the first sentence and **5** for the last sentence (the thesis statement), write the numbers in the blanks.

_____ However, we all like a good success story.

_____ Known for their furniture and their many inventions, such as the first circular saw in America, the Shakers came here in 1774 and ran successful communities in the United States for 150 years.

_____ We often learn more from our failures than from our successes.

_____ Their simple, celibate life without excessive material wealth was the key to their success.

_____ For example, because of the Shakers' success in running a religious utopian community for many years, people today enjoy reading about their lifestyle.

3 Evaluate the following statements, and put checks (✓) next to the ones that are good thesis statements. In your evaluation, do not automatically think that the longer the statement, the better a thesis statement it is. For those you identify as good thesis statements, discuss how you think the writer could develop each of these statements in the body of the essay.

- _____ 1. If we provide everyone in our society with a living wage, good housing conditions, and adequate social services, we will be on the road to creating a utopia.
- _____ 2. The idea of utopia existed in China, India, and various Buddhist and Islamic cultures before More's publication of *Utopia* in 1516.
- _____ 3. The origin of the word *utopia* is Greek; it means "no place."
- _____ 4. People who do a combination of physical and mental work lead wholesome lives.
- _____ 5. Authors often write dystopias to warn us about the dangers of modern-day society: conformity, selfishness, and violence.
- _____ 6. In this essay, the writer will discuss science fiction and utopianism.
- _____ 7. Justice cannot possibly prevail in a society where the majority of the people do the physical labor under the supervision of the privileged few.
- _____ 8. Although this book is not read much today, Samuel Butler's *Erewhon* is a major work in utopian literature that deserves careful consideration.

4 Read the following introductory paragraphs, and put a check (✓) next to the best thesis statement from the choices given.

1. Considering the fact that the nineteenth century is the period in which the United States greatly expanded its territory and its economy, it is not surprising to learn that more than 200 experimental utopian communities were started in the 1800s. In a hundred years, the United States experienced great growth and went from a country of 16 states and 5 million people to one of 42 states and 76 million people. As the country developed, many settlers seeking a better life founded utopian communities and struggled—often with little success—to transform their ideals into reality. Noteworthy in this period are three Tennessee communities, Nashoba, Rugby, and Ruskin, all of which found their inspiration in the economic and social ideas of Robert Owen.

Thesis Statement

- _____ a. In this essay, the writer will discuss Nashoba, Rugby, and Ruskin.
- _____ b. Like many other utopian communities, Nashoba, Rugby, and Ruskin failed because of a lack of strong leadership in the absence of their founders, internal mismanagement, and an inability to state priorities and stick to them.
- _____ c. Robert Owen's community, New Harmony, Indiana, was one of the first and most influential utopian communities in the United States.

2. Could you ever imagine living in a society where books were banned? This is the main theme of *Fahrenheit 451*, Ray Bradbury's tale of a dystopia in which firefighters spend their days burning the books found in readers' houses. Although the story may seem extreme, totalitarian governments throughout the course of history have forbidden people to think for themselves and express their own views. Books have been banned in countries governed by totalitarian regimes because free access to all books and other publications could give people information that their governments might not want them to have. Unfortunately, today we have found that this effort to control citizens' access to information and their right to free expression is not limited to totalitarian societies alone. Even in democratic societies, where freedom is supposed to exist, there is sometimes pressure to censor and eliminate certain kinds of publications. "This publication will offend someone," the guardians of public morality declare. I don't agree with such a line of reasoning.

Thesis Statement

- _____ a. Censorship in any shape or form is not compatible with freedom.
- _____ b. People will be offended by what they hear, but this is unavoidable.
- _____ c. Freedom has its limits.