

The Thesis Statement:

A thesis statement is a central thought that holds your entire National History Day (NHD) project together. In the beginning, we like to call this a working thesis, because as you gather your research, this thought can evolve. By the time you present your NHD project, however, you should have a concrete thesis that is supported by evidence.

Thesis = Topic + Theme + Impact. In other words, you are not just introducing your topic, you are creating an argument that expresses your topic's significance and demonstrates how the theme plays a central part.

Sample Statements: Do's and Don'ts

DISCLAIMER: Even the "DO" statements are a work in progress.

Don't: Martin Luther was born in 1483. He started the Reformation.

Do: Martin Luther disagreed with aspects of Roman Catholic religious practices, especially the sale of indulgences, religious corruption, and the emphasis on salvation through good works. He took action by posting and distributing his 95 theses and left a lasting legacy by sparking a religious movement, creating a new sect of faith, and later motivating reform to the Roman Catholic Church.

Don't: Thesis: I am going to tell you about Oskar Schindler.

Do: Oskar Schindler disagreed with the persecution of the Jews and took action against the Nazi party by hiding 1,300 people in his munitions factory risking his own life and spending his fortune in the effort while sparing his workers from certain death.

Don't: Indians fought over Alcatraz Island. Why do you think they would do that?

Do: In protest over political and social discrimination, thousands of American Indians refused to compromise with government officials and reclaimed Alcatraz Island in 1969 as Indian land. Though many of the group's aims were not met their actions succeeded in spreading awareness and sparking the modern American Indian Movement, a legacy that inspires pride and action still today.

Don't: I think Susan B. Anthony did good things.

Do: Susan B. Anthony fought for women's right to vote. Through social action and her writings, Anthony inspired thousands of women and men to fight for suffrage, which eventually resulted in the 19th amendment.

Don't: Jackie Robinson was a really important black baseball player.

Do: Jackie Robinson played baseball at a time when teams were segregated, black from white. With the assistance of team manager Branch Rickey, Robinson took action, desegregating Major League Baseball as the first black ball player with the Brooklyn Dodgers. He left a legacy opening professional sports to African American athletes.

Don't: Adolph Hitler killed a lot of Jews.

Do: Following the "Great War," Adolph Hitler blamed Germany's economic and militaristic downfalls on the Jewish people. Through the use of established anti-Semitism, Hitler orchestrated the mass extermination of Jews and other "non-desirables" killing more than twelve million people and reshaping the social and cultural landscape of many European nations.

TESTING YOUR THESIS

A thesis statement expresses an informed opinion, which is to say, it provides an explanation based on research and analysis. To test the strength of your thesis, think about what an opposing opinion might be. If someone could argue that your topic is not significant in history, or that it is significant for a different reason, how would you argue against their interpretation? Why is your view stronger?

Here is an example of a thesis you might have developed based on your research on Jackie Robinson:

When Jackie Robinson broke the color bar in professional baseball, he was the catalyst for the civil rights movement, and a champion for the rights of African Americans.

Here are some other interpretations:

Rosa Parks was a more important catalyst for the civil rights movement than Jackie Robinson. The movement was launched in Southern communities, not on the playing field.

This does not mean your thesis is wrong. It does mean that you might want to think about the wording some more, and carefully consider what you actually want to say about the significance of Robinson in history.

To visualize and organize your ideas, try drawing a chart like this one on a piece of paper. List all the possible arguments you can imagine in the top row, then in the next row, write notes on the specific evidence that supports each one. (If you're just beginning your research, don't worry if you can't fill in a lot of information. Your ideas will grow and develop as you learn more about your topic.)

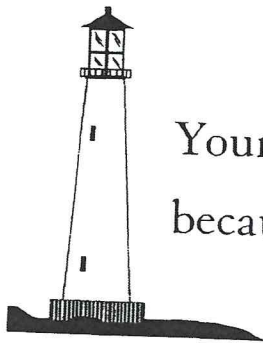
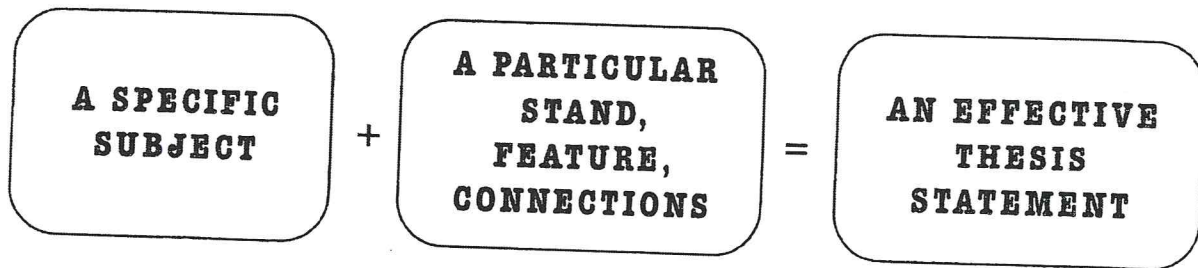
Now consider the strength of each argument. Do you need more evidence to support your thesis statement? How will you deal with evidence that supports a different argument? Thinking about questions like these can help you decide what the next step in your research and thesis development should be.

WRITING A THESIS STATEMENT

“An effective thesis statement tells readers specifically what you plan to write about in your paper. A thesis statement usually takes a stand or expresses a specific feeling or feature of your subject.”

—Writers, Inc.

Your thesis statement will explain what you believe your research project can prove or support with appropriate facts and details.



Your thesis statement is like a lighthouse ...
because it will guide you along the way.

DEVELOPMENT OF THESIS STATEMENTS

SAMPLE 1

1. History Day Theme = *Turning Points*

Basic Interest Area = *Civil War*

Narrowed Subject = *Battle of Gettysburg (event)*

Working Thesis Statement = *The battle of Gettysburg was a major turning point of the Civil War.*

Final Thesis Statement = *The Battle of Gettysburg was a major turning point of the Civil War. It turned the tide of the war from the South to the North, pushing back Lee's army that would never fight again on Northern soil and bringing confidence to the Union army.*

SAMPLE 2

2. History Day Theme = *Science and Technology*

Basic Interest Area = *air conditioning*

Narrowed Subject = *air conditioning changing the American way of life (idea)*

Working Thesis Statement = *The advent of air conditioning spurred the migration of Northerners to the Southern states such as Florida.*

Final Thesis Statement = *The advent of air conditioning spurred the migration of Northerners to the Southern states such as Florida. This shift significantly changed the economy and culture of the South.*

TESTING YOUR THESIS (cont.)

My argument: (Why my topic is significant in history)

Opposing argument:

Evidence that supports my argument:

Evidence that supports the opposing argument:

Which argument is strongest? Why?

Should I modify my argument? How?

Can I strengthen my argument by presenting more evidence or stating my thesis more clearly? How?

Adapted from "A Student's Guide to National History Day: Almost Everything You Need to Know to Get Started on Your History Day Adventure." Wisconsin History Day