

The Thesis and The Sentence Outline

A Guide for Students in Writing Classes at
Georgia Perimeter College

Fourth Edition

by

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To the Instructor: This textbook supplement is not intended as a definitive guide to constructing thesis statements or outlines; it simply provides models for commonly used approaches to writing essays and research papers.

Student outlines and papers are used with permission.

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The Thesis

Any study of outlining must begin by looking at the thesis statement because it is the central idea that controls the paper.

A thesis may be defined as a statement of the writer's opinion (or judgment) on a limited topic, a clearly stated view that can be supported by REASON and CONCRETE EVIDENCE.

The guidelines that follow will be useful in composing a workable thesis statement.

Guideline One: Keep It Focused

A thesis should be a single, declarative sentence containing only one main (or independent) clause. In other words, a thesis needs to be a simple or complex sentence: there is no point within that sentence where the writer could insert a period and create two separate sentences. The sentences that follow are poor thesis statements because they are compound—they express more than one idea:

WEAK: Most commuter college students prefer the convenience of driving a car to campus; however, riding a bicycle to school is a more practical option.

WEAK: Most commuter college students prefer the convenience of driving a car to campus, but riding a bicycle to school is a more practical option.

These thesis statements would produce a paper with a multiple focus—a problem that all skilled writers avoid. Nevertheless, these problem sentences can be restructured:

BETTER: The convenience of driving a car to campus makes it the transportation of choice for most commuter college students.

BETTER: For most commuter college students, riding a bicycle to campus is more practical than driving a car.

Either of these statements (simple sentences) can be developed into a unified essay. They can also be strengthened even more. Suppose the writer wants to argue BOTH sides of the argument in the paper—can the thesis be set up to allow for this? The answer is “yes”—as long as the writer expresses the proper relationship between the ideas by SUBORDINATING one of them in a dependent (or subordinate) clause:

EVEN BETTER: Even though driving a car to campus is convenient, riding a bicycle to school is a more practical option for most commuter college students.

This type of thesis is frequently referred to as an “although-because” thesis and uses a style of argument known as dialectic order. It is now a complex sentence, bringing in elements from both sides of the issue, **but the writer’s opinion on the subject is very clear—there is still a single focus or point of view which is embodied in the main clause.**

This thesis can be further enhanced by providing an answer to the question, “Why?”:

BEST EXAMPLE: Even though driving a car to campus is convenient, riding a bicycle to school is a more practical option for most commuter college students because of the financial and health benefits.

While this revised thesis may seem long, it still advocates only one point, which is expressed in the main clause. In this example, the categories of development (or “essay map” as author Jean Wyrick in *Steps to Writing Well* terms it) are expressed in a prepositional phrase, but they could also have been put in a separate sentence, keeping the actual thesis more concise.

Guideline Two: Keep It Judgmental

The thesis should always express a point of view (i.e. an argument, an attitude, an evaluation or judgment). It should have what author Sheridan Baker in *The Complete Stylist* calls an “argumentative edge.” The following example is weak because it does not express an opinion or a unique viewpoint. There is nothing that the writer can argue in the paper. It is simply a statement of fact:

WEAK: Some commuter college students prefer to drive a car to campus.

The thesis need not be controversial or inflammatory, but it must convey the idea that the writer has something precise to say, an agenda to promote. This is also the reason why a thesis should not be a question like the following example:

WEAK: Why do some commuter college students prefer to drive a car to campus?

An effective thesis provides an answer to a question, a response to a problem that a writer can discuss with specific examples.

Guideline Three: Keep It Clear

A thesis should always express a complete thought in clear, concise wording: the writer should avoid fragments and overused, figurative, or vague terms. Using first person pronouns is also inappropriate in a thesis because the focus is too restrictive. The statements that follow all fail to clearly express the writer’s viewpoint:

- WEAK:** **Riding a bicycle to campus.** [This fragment says nothing about the subject.]
- WEAK:** **Riding a bicycle to school is like winning the Lucky Strike lottery.** [Using a simile here may be creative and whimsical, but it does not clearly convey the writer's point.]
- WEAK:** **Riding a bicycle to campus is a really good thing to do.** [Why is it good? How is it good? What exactly does the writer mean by "good"? This thesis is too vague.]
- WEAK:** **I think riding a bicycle is the best way for a commuter college student to get to campus.** [Is your opinion the only one that matters? Why should the reader care what you think? This sentence needs a broader audience appeal.]

Ideally, the thesis sentence should contain two or three precise KEY TERMS on which the writer will focus the argument of the paper. Moreover, key points should be expressed in parallel, grammatical structure. While the following sentence contains key concepts and expresses a judgment, it is weak because the elements are not expressed in equal terms (i.e. they are not parallel):

- WEAK:** **For most commuter college students, riding a bicycle to campus is more practical than automobile transportation because of the financial benefits and it is healthy.**

The problems with parallel structure have been corrected in the following example:

- BETTER:** **For most commuter college students, riding a bicycle to campus is more practical than driving a car because of the financial and health benefits.**

Guideline Four: Keep It Prominent

One final point about the thesis is that the IDEA of this sentence must appear in a prominent place in both the introduction and the conclusion of the paper. Although the thesis as it is stated in the outline need not appear word for word in these two places, at least a paraphrased or modified version of the original sentence is essential. In a standard essay, the thesis is usually the last sentence of the introductory paragraph; it is then re-stated (paraphrased) as the first sentence of the concluding paragraph.

In effect, in the thesis a writer must reach a conclusion—a carefully considered view, a focused idea—before launching into a defense of that view in an essay. Effective writers STOP AND THINK, and then defend their conclusion from the outset of the essay.

The Sentence Outline

For the beginning writer an outline is an indispensable tool. It is the blueprint for the paper, and as a building contractor would not dream of constructing a house without the blueprint or plan in hand, so the writer should not begin a paper without first writing the outline.

Some writers like to write a first draft of a paper without an outline, just letting the ideas flow onto the page. This is acceptable as long as the writer takes the second important step—constructing the outline to make sure that there are sufficient ideas to prove the thesis and adequate specific examples to support those ideas. The outline also insures that ideas logically relate to each other.

Writers should recognize that outlines are flexible. If ideas evolve in the writing process, then the outline should reflect the changes, giving the writer an opportunity to test the logical relationship of the new ideas against the thesis and the overall structure of the paper.

There are two types of formal outlines: topic outlines and sentence outlines. In the topic outline, each entry is written as a single word or short phrase; in the sentence outline, each entry is written (and punctuated) as a complete sentence. Taking one of the thesis statements developed earlier, a student could develop a **topic outline** for a short paper (five to seven hundred fifty words) like this:

Cycling: The Commuter's Choice

Thesis: Even though driving a car to campus is convenient, riding a bicycle to school is a more practical option for most commuter college students because of the financial and health benefits.

- I. Convenience of driving a car
 - A. Easy transport
 - 1. For carrying multiple items like books
 - 2. For protecting driver and passengers from weather
 - B. Reliable transport
 - 1. Can commute long distances without difficulty
 - 2. Can cover short distances quickly
- II. Cost effectiveness of riding a bicycle
 - A. Inexpensive to operate
 - 1. No license required
 - 2. No parking fees
 - B. Inexpensive to maintain
 - 1. No expensive repair bills
 - 2. No gasoline

III. Health benefits of riding a bicycle

- A. Personal health
 - 1. Exercise
 - 2. Stress reduction
- B. Environmental health
 - 1. Reduces traffic congestion
 - 2. Eliminates toxic emissions

Here is the same thesis developed as a **sentence outline**:

Cycling: The Commuter's Choice

Thesis: Even though driving a car to campus is convenient, riding a bicycle to school is a more practical option for most commuter college students because of the financial and health benefits.

- I. Driving a car to campus is convenient.
 - A. A car provides an easy way to carry things and people.
 - 1. It accommodates many items like books.
 - 2. It allows people to travel protected from the weather.
 - B. A car provides a reliable form of transportation.
 - 1. Students can effectively commute long distances.
 - 2. Students can travel short distances quickly.
- II. Riding a bicycle to school is cost effective.
 - A. A bicycle is inexpensive to operate.
 - 1. A driver's license is not required to operate a bicycle.
 - 2. Parking fees are not required for a bicycle.
 - B. A bicycle is inexpensive to maintain.
 - 1. A bicycle does not incur expensive repair bills.
 - 2. A bicycle operates without gasoline.
- III. Riding a bicycle to school promotes health.
 - A. Riding a bicycle improves personal health.
 - 1. It is an excellent form of exercise.
 - 2. It reduces stress by eliminating driving and parking hassles.
 - B. Riding a bicycle improves the health of the environment.
 - 1. It reduces traffic congestion.
 - 2. It eliminates toxic emissions into the atmosphere.

The topic and sentence outlines here develop the thesis in essentially the same way, but the sentence outline is more clear because the ideas are specified. Sentence outlines are, thus, preferable to topic outlines in composition classes because both the instructor and the student know what the paper will discuss: there are fewer misunderstandings. Furthermore, a sentence outline forces the writer to articulate ideas fully before developing them in the paper—a demanding but rewarding process. Once the sentence outline for a paper is complete, writing the actual composition is relatively easy.

The following guidelines (illustrated in the two outlines above) can serve as a checklist when writing an outline:

Guideline One: Make Sure the Ideas Logically Relate

Outlines are based on the principle of division: the Roman numerals are subdivisions of the thesis; the capital letters are subdivisions of the Roman numerals; the Arabic numbers are subdivisions of the capital letters, and so on. Thus, the progression of an outline is from general concepts to specific examples, all in logical relationship to each other. For example, in the above outline, not needing a driver's license (II.A.1.) and the elimination of parking fees (II.A.2.) are two specific reasons why operating a bicycle is inexpensive (II.A). Being inexpensive to operate (II.A.) is one major reason why riding a bicycle is cost effective (II.) which, in turn, supports the assertion in the thesis that for most commuter college students, riding a bicycle to campus is more practical than driving a car. It is important that the logical relationship between ideas be clear in the outline (and, hence, the paper). Including key terms from the thesis in the outline divisions will promote logical relationships between ideas.

Important Points to Remember:

- The Roman numerals serve as valid premises (reasonable assumptions) supporting the writer's conclusion (thesis); thus, if these premises are accepted as true, then the thesis is a logical conclusion.
- The order of the Roman numerals should reflect the most effective order for presenting the thesis. The best approach is to start with the weakest point or argument and work up to the strongest point.
- The introduction and conclusion of the paper are *not* included in the outline—the outline is a blueprint of the argument in the paper itself, not a diagram of the paper's paragraphs.
- Outlines should be typed using double spacing; examples in this document are single spaced to conserve space and reduce printing costs. In addition, outlines are typically entitled "Outline"; examples in this document use the complete title of the essay for easier, specific reference.

Guideline Two: Make Sure There Is Adequate Supporting Material

Common sense dictates that nothing can be subdivided into less than two parts. Outlines, thus, need at least two divisions for each section: the thesis should be divided into at least two Roman numerals; each Roman numeral needs at least an A. and a B.; each A. and B. needs at least a 1. and a 2., etc. Additional elements (C.'s, D.'s, and E.'s or 3.'s, 4.'s and 5.'s) may be added as needed. The idea is to produce two or more subdivisions per point, not simply an even number of subdivisions.