

# Thesis Statements and Counter-Claims

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A **thesis statement** is a claim that sets up your argument. Your thesis should situate your argument within a broader discussion, which will likely involve addressing **possible objections, or counter-claims**. Counter-claims will help you develop a well-rounded argument by showing you've considered many possible positions on your topic.

## Strategies for generating a thesis statement

1. If something about the text or issue you are considering bothers or intrigues you, **make note of it**. Sometimes the issues which perplex us make the best grounds for arguments.
2. **Do some general browsing** to see the kinds of things people are talking about in relation to this text/issue. Look up a recent journal article (See the "Library Database Guide" and "Evaluating Sources" handouts). Check out the footnotes in a scholarly edition of your text. You might even glance at Wikipedia, just to get some sense of the debatable issues.
3. After you've come up with a topic and your own claim about it, **verbalize your thesis to someone else**. Ask your friend to challenge you on certain points, which will help you recognize which counter-claims you need to include.

## A thesis statement must...

### Require further defending.

It should not simply be a fact. To test this, ask yourself: "Could anyone argue *against* this?" *This claim requires further defending:*

"In Book IX of Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Satan disguises himself as a serpent and tricks Eve into eating the apple."

*Though it can be supported by the text, no one would argue with this statement.*

### Pose a possible answer to a question, not be itself a question.

Although it might be a good idea to ask a pointed question in your introductory paragraph, your thesis statement should provide your own answer.

"Although Eve eats the apple first, is Milton's Eve characterized entirely unsympathetically?"

*This question might set up a nice argument (that Milton deflects blame from Eve through Satan's rhetorical prowess), but it is not a thesis statement itself.*

### Be narrow enough to argue in the size of your paper.

Your claim should not be too broad.

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“All twelve books of *Paradise Lost* supply a slightly different depiction of Satan, and thus a slightly different depiction of the nature of sin.”  
*You could easily write an entire paper on the depiction of Satan and the nature of sin in just one book, or even one passage of Paradise Lost.*

### **Be wide enough to provide a real task to argue.**

Your claim should not be too narrow.

“When Eve gazes at her reflection in the water, Milton reveals that she is self-centered.”

*This statement is merely a narrow observation; however, asking yourself questions about this and other related moments could lead you to a claim.*

### **Be clear.**

Avoid ambiguous words like “good” or “important.”

“In Book IX of *Paradise Lost*, events transpire which make Eve play an important role in the narrative of the Fall.”

*This statement does not indicate which events nor what is important about these events, nor the exact nature of Eve’s role.*

## **Addressing Potential Counter-Claims**

If you’re arguing that Satan is the bad guy, not Eve, consider what others might say to *defend* Satan and *condemn* Eve (e.g. “Satan just wants to be loved, while Eve only cares about herself”). Integrate these counter-claims into your argument (e.g. “Although Satan is momentarily charmed by the beauty and harmony of Eden, he soon suppresses that feeling and arms himself to subject Eve to his will”).

### **“Signal” words for addressing counter claims:**

- One the one hand \_\_\_\_; on the other hand \_\_\_\_.
- Although \_\_\_\_, in reality \_\_\_\_.
- Author X contradicts what she says earlier... While she argues \_\_\_\_, she also \_\_\_\_.
- I agree that \_\_\_\_\_. However, \_\_\_\_\_.
- This is not to say that \_\_\_\_\_.

## **Reminders**

- Be open to continual revision of your thesis statement.
- Just because your thesis statement comes first in the paper doesn’t mean that you have to write it first. Often, it will evolve throughout the process of writing.

## **Where in *The Bedford Handbook*?**

Section 1e: Thesis Revision

See also: *They Say, I Say* by Gerald Graff and Cathy Birkenstein, especially Parts I and II.