



Thesis Statement Guidelines for High School Students

The thesis statement is *the theme of your essay put into a sentence*. It is the *departure point* of your argument. Everything in your expository essay *stems from* and *refers back to* your thesis statement.

The thesis statement generally shows up in either of two places in the opening paragraph of your expository essay:

- in the last sentence of the introductory paragraph (this kind of introduction is called the “funnel introduction”; it funnels down to the thesis at the end of the paragraph).
- as the very first sentence in the introductory paragraph (I recommend this approach for SAT-essay writing).

The thesis statement *always has a point of view*. To express a point of view, however, is not to state a “mere opinion” (for example, I hate chocolate ice cream). Think of the thesis statement as a way of entering into or initiating a conversation regarding an important matter (such as, for example, global warming, healthcare, coed versus gender-segregated education, the importance of being bilingual or multilingual).

When composing a thesis statement, avoid using the words “should” or “must.” Such terms transform the thesis from a thoughtful statement into a moralizing one. Moralizing thesis statements are never successful. As I like to say: Analyze, don’t moralize! Your thesis statement, rather, should represent a well-considered point of view.

Consider the following two attempts at responding to the following SAT-essay prompt: *Is it more valuable for people to fit in than to be unique and different?*

1. It is right for everyone to be unique and different.
2. While it is easier for many people to go along with the majority, and although I like to “fit in” myself, I still believe that one gains greater personal growth and more exciting experiences when not conforming to the crowd. (Yes, you can use “I,” the first person.)

Let’s take a look at **Statement 1**. It gives a mere opinion to which someone can respond in only one of two ways. One can agree (Yes, it is right.) or disagree (No, it is wrong.). Either way, the statement does not begin a conversation but rather shuts it down from the beginning (as with the chocolate ice cream example). It is nothing more than a moralizing, blanket statement.

Notice, too, the use of the word “everyone.” Using words like “everyone,” “all,” “every,” or “never” results in thesis statements that include *everyone or everything in the world*—a dangerous thing to do. It is difficult to say anything about *everything* without someone coming up with an objection immediately. Such statements are too strong and inflexible.

Statement 2 offers much more to a writer and a reader. First, look at the structure of the sentence. It is a *complex sentence* with two subordinate clauses in front of the main, independent clause. Looking at the sentence from its structure alone, you can see how much richer it is.

The subordinate clauses in this sentence give you, the writer, *room to write*. In order to elaborate on the thesis successfully, the writer might provide a brief account or anecdotes explaining:

- the idea that it is easier to go along with the majority
- the writer’s confession that s/he likes to fit in

You can then expand on the idea that one “gains greater personal growth and more exciting experiences when not conforming...” by providing vivid examples of a character from literature/film, a historical figure, someone important in current events, or personal experience (warning: the personal experience needs to be detailed and relevant—not just a set of general thoughts about how hard is to be a nonconformist high school, for example).

Notice that this thesis names two benefits of being unique:

1. personal growth
2. more exciting experiences

This means that you can elaborate on both of these ideas. Again, writing a thesis in this way gives you more to talk about, more examples or evidence to draw upon, and more details to include. The more examples, evidence, and details in your expository essay (relevant and well-written, of course!), the better a score or grade you will get.

Note, too, that **Statement 2** uses the word “many” instead of “all.” In this instance, the writer still has a point of view, but the view is expressed in a *general and not absolute* statement.

So, to sum up:

- Analyze, don’t moralize.
- Avoid absolute statements.
- Write in complex sentences that give you room to elaborate.
- For the SAT essay, begin immediately with your thesis statement and move right into your first example. Well-written body paragraphs with relevant and interesting examples are far more important than a funnel introduction.