

READING FOR THESIS-STATEMENT IDEAS

Upon successful completion of this lesson, you should be able to:

- identify the thesis statement in a piece of writing
- identify the supporting arguments (main ideas) in a piece of writing
- develop a thesis statement in which you challenge the thesis statement in another piece of writing
- develop a thesis statement in which you challenge a supporting argument in another piece of writing
- develop a thesis statement in which you challenge an obscure statement in another piece of writing

Sometimes the passion that students have about a certain topic allows them to write a thesis statement without much difficulty. Other times, however, thesis statements do not come so easily. Suppose, for example, that one of your instructors asks you to write an essay about any aspect of American culture. Obviously, the possibilities would be almost endless. In fact, there would be so many possibilities that simply thinking about the assignment might overwhelm you.

On such occasions, you should try *reading for ideas*. Instead of trying to think of an idea while staring at the wall in your dorm room, read a few newspaper or magazine articles that relate to American culture. When you read critically, thinking seriously about every sentence and whether you agree or disagree with it, thesis statements will often come to mind.

In the essay below, three sentences are bolded and underlined. They are also numbered in the margin. Note these sentences as you read. They will be discussed in detail later in this lesson.

Housing Associations' Prohibitive Rules Bad for Country

by Joe American

Rules that prohibit the display of campaign signs are common in housing developments throughout the nation, but just because they are common does not mean they are right. **Such rules are bad for America.** All people, regardless of their voter preferences or political affiliation—and regardless of whether they rent or own—should be allowed to display campaign signs on their lawns and in their windows. In addition to violating the First Amendment, regulations that prohibit campaign signs discourage

1.
**Thesis
Statement**

expression of good citizenship, foster our country's unhealthy obsession with political correctness, and, quite frankly, threaten democracy.

Today more than ever the country needs people who understand the relationship between citizenship and political awareness, for one of the most unfortunate facts about American society is that far too many citizens have attitudes of apathy and indifference about politics. Because the lack of participation in government is such a colossal problem in America, **housing developments that prohibit the display of campaign signs discourage an important expression of good citizenship.** By displaying simple, non-offensive signs with candidates' names on them, citizens create opportunities to engage in healthy political discussions with neighbors and passers-by, some of whom will inevitably be politically apathetic individuals. The more conversations that politically aware citizens have with these people, the greater the chance that the politically apathetic will begin to participate in government. And the more people participate, the closer America moves to the type of people-dominated government that our forefathers envisioned. Therefore, in no small way, displaying a campaign sign is a good civic act.

Another bothersome aspect of this issue has to do with our nation's obsession with political correctness and the fact that Americans are quickly becoming a people who cannot disagree politely. Because feelings about political matters are strong, because more and more people are learning to play the "I'm-offended" card when they disagree with something, and because society is beginning to cater to those who are easily offended, regulating political expression has in itself become a politically correct thing to do. Unfortunately, housing development boards across the nation have jumped on the PC bandwagon. That the campaign-sign police of housing developments are part of the politically correct movement is evident in the

**2. Main Idea
of
Supporting
Argument**

fact that housing development officials *selectively* enforce community rules. Housing association boards often turn a blind eye to a number of violations but waste no time enforcing the rules when it comes to political expression. God forbid residents “offend” someone by expressing a political opinion.

Of course, many of the absurd rules and regulations such as the prohibition of campaign signs are imposed for economic reasons. Some people think that a development dotted with campaign signs would look trashy and therefore push property values down. Common sense, however, says otherwise. A campaign sign in a person’s yard is an indication that the resident cares about his or her society. It demonstrates a genuine concern for country and local community, a concern that should increase property values, not decrease them. In essence, neighborhoods with campaign signs attract prospective residents who have something in common with the people who already live in those communities—a concern for America. Furthermore, campaign signs today are usually not eyesores. The majority of people who campaign for public office spend a considerable amount of money on manufactured signs that are decent-looking and durable. Generally, people do not anchor homemade signs of plywood and spray paint in their yards—especially not in housing developments.

Even if signs *were* eyesores, however, a philosophical cost-benefit analysis suggests that allowing them would outweigh the cost of prohibiting them, for prohibiting them threatens the political system that makes America great. The prohibition of campaign signs is just one example of how housing developments can take an almost totalitarian approach to government. In some developments, residents must obtain permission to do exterior work as simple as painting shutters. The desire to keep places beautiful is great; however, **people usually try to keep up with their neighbors in terms of home improvement and maintenance**, especially in housing

3. Not a major point—just a sentence within the supporting argument

developments. People don't need to be treated as if they are children. Such an approach to local housing government sends a dangerous message to citizens. That is, residents are not capable of making good decisions; therefore, even the simplest home improvements must be governed by officials. This is not the spirit of democracy. When people grow accustomed to being controlled at the micro level, such as in their housing developments, they become more inclined to accept totalitarianism at the macro level. And when that happens across the country, democracy as our founding fathers envisioned it will cease to exist.

Housing associations must stop thwarting residents' attempts to be good citizens. They must stop catering to the politically correct movement of preventing any political opinion with which someone might disagree. And they must stop governing as if residents are incapable of using good judgment in making even the simplest of decisions. Overly prohibitive community rules affect more than just the immediate communities in which they are imposed. They negatively affect the American spirit.

The essay above certainly works as a possible idea generator for the hypothetical assignment mentioned at the beginning of the lesson, for the governance of housing developments is an aspect of American culture. Moreover, the essay allows you to explore three different ways you can read for thesis-statement ideas.

When students are instructed to read for ideas, they often find a thesis statement with which they disagree and then challenge it with an opposing thesis. The thesis in the essay above is that *[housing association rules that prohibit the display of campaign signs] are bad for the country* (emphasized sentence #1). You might completely disagree with this thesis. If so, and if you felt strongly enough about the issue to write a paper explaining your disagreement, your thesis statement would be easy to write. It might read:

Contrary to Joe American's opinion, housing association rules that prohibit the display of campaign signs are good for the country.

You might also take a slightly different approach, one that does not challenge the thesis directly but challenges the essence of it:

Local housing authorities have every right to prohibit residents from displaying campaign signs.

Either approach might work. The point is that the thesis statement in a piece of writing might evoke strong emotions and consequently help you develop a thesis of your own.

You might also feel strongly opposed to any one of an author's supporting arguments—not necessarily his or her thesis. One of the supporting arguments in the sample essay is that *housing developments that prohibit the display of campaign signs discourage an important expression of good citizenship* (emphasized statement #2). Perhaps you adamantly disagree. Maybe you believe that the prohibition of campaign signs fosters peace and unity since campaign signs can cause sharp disagreements between neighbors—even violence. Therefore, you believe it is the display of campaign signs—not the prohibition of them—that actually discourages citizenship. And maybe you can think of other reasons that the author is wrong. If so, you might write a thesis statement that reads:

Contrary to Joe American's opinion, housing developments' prohibition of campaign signs actually fosters good citizenship.

Of course, you might read an entire article or essay and not react strongly to a thesis statement or a particular supporting argument, but you might take issue with some obscure statement that the author perhaps does not even intend to be controversial. Take emphasized statement #3 in the sample essay, for instance. The author writes that “people usually try to keep up with their neighbors in terms of home improvement and maintenance...” Since the statement is buried deep in the paragraph, the author probably takes for granted that someone might disagree with it.

While you agree with the rest of the author's points, you have personal experience that informs your dissent about this particular statement. You once lived in what started as a nice housing development but eventually lost its appeal. Even though your parents spent a lot of money on underground sprinkler systems, siding maintenance, and landscape design, your neighbors did not maintain their property. Recalling a backyard conversation between your father and one neighbor in particular, you know that it wasn't because the neighboring families didn't try. Rather, they simply did not have the disposable income to keep up with your father's improvements. You were an only child, but your neighbors to the south were a family of seven—with three children in private colleges at the same time. Home improvement was simply not a major priority for them.

There were also other reasons the neighbors did not maintain their property well. Both parents worked long hours, and the father in the family traveled a lot during the summer, when people usually make home improvements. They simply did not have the means to make improvements that your family had.

And after doing some minimal research, you find that the author's claim is not only debatable, it may be blatantly false. Of the fifteen housing developments in your

hometown, all of them have at least seven properties that suffer from neglect. Moreover, economic recessions and financial uncertainty impact many people.

Your reaction to Joe American's statement has helped you arrive at a thesis statement for an assignment. Knowing that you can support it well, you write the following thesis:

Homeowners should react carefully when neighbors neglect their homes and properties. Often, people fail to maintain their residences for good reasons—not just because they don't care.

In short, reading critically can be a great way to think of a thesis statement. When you scrutinize every sentence you read, you will most likely find a topic that you can write about.

EXERCISE 1

Read the following essay. Then address the questions and prompts at the end. Work with your tutor while you answer the questions.

Occasion for the essay: A tomato farmer, who sells whole tomatoes and also makes tomato-based products, is competing for a larger percentage of a supermarket chain's budget. He writes the essay for a food magazine, knowing that the chain's Chief Executive Officer reads the publication.

The Tomato, Staple of the American Diet

by Sloppy Joe Sauce

Dietary habits in many countries are often rooted in certain "staple" foods that bind most meals together. In Asian countries, rice is the staple. In South America, wheat and flour tortillas are an important part of most meals. The British Isles are known for their mutton. But what about the United States. As a cultural melting pot, does the United States have one particular food that is more important than another?

The answer, of course, is yes. It is a round, vine-grown, red fruit that is frequently and mistakenly referred to as a vegetable. Sometimes thrown at sporting events, the delicious, juicy tomato is the most important food in the typical American's diet. Besides being a necessary ingredient in many American dishes, it is a defining ingredient in three of America's favorite meals. Pizza, spaghetti, and the ever-popular burger-and-fries meal would fail to delight us if not for the tomato.

Can you imagine eating a pizza without tomato sauce? It wouldn't be a pizza—it would simply be a bread pie with some toppings on it. The tomato is the most important ingredient on a pizza. And while toppings vary and dough can be as thick as a book or as thin as a small-town newspaper, pizza sauce always has the same red fruit as its base. In pizza, the tomato is the tie that binds.

Like pizza, spaghetti originated in Italy, but it is an American favorite. Easy to make and fun to eat (most kids love it), spaghetti is a weekly staple in many household kitchens and school cafeterias. And like pizza, spaghetti is dependent upon tomato sauce. It's true that some people won't eat spaghetti without meatballs, but meatballs without sauce would just be, well, balls of meat—just as pasta without sauce would be boring. Tomato sauce is what brings spaghetti to life.

Of course, one can't discuss the typical American diet without mentioning a hamburger and fries, and one cannot dismiss the tomato's importance in this classic American meal. On a plate containing a hamburger and French fries, the tomato often wears more than one hat. Sliced round and fresh, the tomato graces the space between a patty and a bun like nothing else can. And the burger gets a double shot of tomato when ketchup is added for an extra bit of taste. Moreover, ketchup goes with fries like ice cream goes with apple pie. Without the tomato, the burger-and-fries meal would not have the same appeal.

Clearly, the tomato has a promising future in America. In addition to being a major ingredient in chili, salads, steak sauces, Mexican food sauces, soups, and a variety of main dishes, it is also the staple of some of America's favorite meals, such as pizza, spaghetti, and burgers and fries. Almost everyone in the country regularly consumes tomatoes in some form or another.

1-A. What is the thesis statement of the essay?

1-B. Write a thesis statement and at least two supporting arguments that challenge the essay's thesis.

2-A. What are the main ideas of the supporting arguments in the essay?

2-B. Choose any one of the supporting arguments and write a thesis statement and at least two supporting arguments in opposition to it.

3-A. Find a debatable statement that is neither the thesis nor the main idea of a supporting argument.

3-B. Write a thesis statement and at least two supporting arguments in opposition to the statement you chose for item 3-A.