**THESIS STATEMENTS IN LITERARY ANALYSIS PAPERS**

**\*The thesis statement is one of the (if not *the*) most important parts of your paper—think of it as the foundation of a house—if your foundation is weak and poorly constructed, what do you think happens to the house?**

**\*The thesis statement is the announcement of your analytical argument that you intend to make and prove in the duration of your paper. It is a road map for the paper—it tells the reader what to expect from the rest of the paper.**

**\*It should be placed somewhere in the Introduction of your paper—Many like to put it as the last sentence(s) of their Intro which is fine.**

**\*Successful thesis statements provoke thought and should read beautifully.**

**\*Your thesis statement should include two parts: WHAT and WHY.**

 **\*WHAT: What claim are you making about the text?**

**\*WHY: Why should we care? Why is your claim important? Your thesis should answer the “so what?” question.**

**\*A thesis statement is usually, but can be more than, one sentence long.**

**Examples of Literary Thesis Statements:**

**\* “Mark Twain’s *Huckleberry Finn* is a great American novel.”**

 **\*What’s wrong with this thesis statement?**

 **\*An opinion about the book, not an argument.**

**\* “In *Huckleberry Finn*, Mark Twain develops a contrast between life on the river and life on the shore.”**

 **\*Better? How so? What is still missing?**

**\*Doesn’t answer the “so what?” question—what is the point of the contrast? What does the contrast signify?**

**\* “Through its contrasting river and shore scenes, Twain’s *Huckleberry Finn* suggests that to find the true expression of American ideals, one must leave ‘civilized’ society and go back to nature.”**

 **\*Even better?**

**\*It presents an interpretation of a literary work based on an analysis of its content and answers the “so what” question.**

**\* “Edgar Allen Poe’s work was affected greatly by the current events of his life, covering his family life, his childhood, and his career; these events changed the style and subject of his works.”**

 **\*What’s wrong with this thesis statement?**

**\*More questions than answers: which works will be explored? What current events? What childhood or career events? How did Poe’s style change and WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?**

**\* “There is a lot of symbolism in *The Scarlet Letter*.”**

 **\*Bad? Why?**

**\* “Hawthorne’s use of symbolism in *The Scarlet Letter* falters and ultimately breaks down with the introduction of the character Pearl.”**

 **\*Better? Why?**

**\* “The character of Ben in Arthur Miller’s *Death of a Salesman*** **is a great [or important, or crucial, or unforgettable, etc.] character.”**

 **\*What’s wrong with thesis?**

**\*This does not say enough to serve as the basis for an essay.  Besides, each of these judgments is entirely a matter of personal opinion because none of them define the criteria by which the judgment is being made.**

**\* “Through Paul’s experience behind the lines, at a Russian prisoner of war camp, and especially under bombardment in the trenches, Erich Maria Remarque realistically shows how war dehumanizes a man.”**

**\*What can we anticipate that the author of this thesis will prove to us in the rest of the paper?**

**Sample literary thesis statements**

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| TOPIC | QUESTION AND THESIS STATEMENT |
| Character  | In The Scarlet Letter, Nathaniel Hawthorne depicts Pearl as alien to her society until her father acknowledges her. |
| Relationships among Characters | In The Catcher in the Rye, Salinger shows that the relationship between Holden and Phoebe acts as a positive force on Holden. |
| Themes | The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn is a satire on racism. |
| Style: Effective use of imagery, foreshadowing, or symbolism to advance character development, theme or artistic purpose | Through the use of images and symbols in The Catcher in the Rye, Salinger reveals many subtleties about Holden's sensitive personality |
| Style: The point of view, or narration advance character development, theme or artistic purpose | The final fifth of The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn does not help fulfill Mark Twain's artistic purpose in the novel. |
| Setting | The raft on the Mississippi River in The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn is a place with different rules than the towns along the river. |
| Structure | In The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, Mark Twain uses the river journey to illustrate Huck's increasing awareness of the moral hypocrisy in the "civilized" South. |
| Historical Context: The social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created | Arthur Miller changed some of the facts about the Salem Witch Trials in his play, The Crucible, to advance his artistic purpose. |
| Critical Overview: Background on critical reputation of the novel including controversies | What reasons do critics have for censoring The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn? Subordinate questions: Is the novel obscene? Is the novel racist? Is the language too coarse? Is it immoral? |
| Media Adaptations | The 1992 movie Of Mice and Men more poignantly expresses the alienation and loneliness of migrant farm workers than the novel. |