

THE THESIS SENTENCE: An Introduction

The **thesis sentence** is the most important sentence in an essay -- the one ruling idea you will support in the body of your paper. It serves as a plan for the writer and a "road map" for the reader. In a sense, it is a contract between the writer and the reader. The writer promises to prove the thesis to the reader.

The thesis is the writer's **opinion** -- an argument, not a fact. Thus, it will have a *limited topic* and one or more *opinion words*. Both of the following sentences have the same *limited topic*-- "The Red-Headed League" -- but only one sentence also has an all-important *opinion* word.

NO "The Red-Headed League" is a short story.

YES "The Red-Headed League" is a **good** short story.

In addition, a thesis sentence usually indicates the minimum number of paragraphs an essay will require. Thus, the sample thesis would be improved by indicating specific components:

"The Red-Headed League" is a **good** story because of
(the suspenseful plot) and (fascinating characters)

Of course, every essay will have an **introduction** and a **conclusion** -- but the number of paragraphs in the body will be determined by *the number of components* in the thesis.

Every Blank = An Essay Component = A Body Paragraph

Part One: The fill-in-the-blank theses below could be used in an informal essay about yourself. On the left, label the number of components promised by each.

1. I can best be described as _____ and _____.
2. I am _____, _____, and _____.
3. Although I see myself as _____, other people may see me as _____.
4. My ability as a _____ comes from _____ and _____.
5. Simple objects, such as _____ and _____, serve as symbols for the most important _____ in my life.
6. Because of _____, I have changed from _____ to _____.
7. I used to be _____; now I am _____; someday I hope to be _____.
8. My three most important goals are to _____, to _____, and to _____.
9. My personality has been shaped by _____, _____, _____, and _____.
10. In the complex life I live, I seem to play many roles: a _____, a _____, and a _____.

Part Two: Now it's your turn to go back to the theses in Part One and fill in the blanks with appropriate words. Remember that the words you choose must express some *opinion*. You are the "I"--so pick words that fit your life. Thinking carefully about each will help you with later assignments.

Part Three: Underline the basic components in the following theses. Then label in the left margin the number of components promised by each thesis.

1. Jabez Wilson may be best characterized as gullible and greedy.
2. Sherlock Holmes is both logical and intuitive.
3. While Dr. Watson is a romantic, Sherlock Holmes is a realist.
4. Sherlock Holmes ability as a detective derives from his powers of observation, his enormous store of knowledge, and his ability to draw logical conclusions.
5. Minor characters, such as Peter Jones, Duncan Ross, and Mr. Wetherby, serve an important function in "The Red-Headed League."
6. Arthur Conan Doyle's choice of Dr. Watson as narrator helps with the characterization of Sherlock Holmes, provides opportunities for foreshadowing, and heightens suspense.
7. "The Red-Headed League" is two stories in one: the story of what happened and the story of what appeared to happen.
8. Successfully reading a mystery like "The Red-Headed League" challenges the reader to be part detective, part eavesdropper, part diviner.
9. Because of his own personality and abilities, Dr. John Watson stands in awe of Sherlock Holmes, but sees deeply into the heart of his friend.
10. Although both Holmes and Watson observe carefully and notice precise details, their differing interpretations of the same information reveal the difference between a "Good Reader" and a "Bad Reader."

Part Four: Select one of the theses you wrote about yourself in Part One and use it as the thesis for your first essay. Copy the thesis sentence you have selected on the index card provided in class. Pick a thesis you can support. Choose carefully since you will share your paper with other students also.

When your thesis is approved by your teacher and your writing group, go on to the Plan Page provided in class.

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|------------------------|-------|----------|
| 1. Thesis Approved | _____ | due date |
| 2. Plan Page Completed | _____ | due date |
| 3. Rough Draft Shared | _____ | due date |
| 4. Edited by Group | _____ | due date |
| 5. Revised Final Draft | _____ | due date |

THE THESIS SENTENCE: Analyzing Sample Theses

Directions: Underline the thesis components in the following. Then indicate in the left margin the number of components promised by each thesis sentence.

1. In *The Old Man and the Sea* by Ernest Hemingway, Santiago, the central character personifies honor, courage, endurance, and faith.
2. T. J., a character in Borden Deal's "Antaeus," is a natural leader because of his self-confidence, his imagination, and his persistence.
3. In "A Worn Path" by Eudora Welty, Phoenix Jackson's spiritual strength and optimism are shown in her walk through the countryside, her experience on the streets, and her meeting with the medical personnel.
4. In "There Will Come Soft Rains," Ray Bradbury presents three contrasting settings to convey the theme of the story.
5. Three important settings -- the first apartment, the dream-like mansion rooms, and the attic flat -- reflect the character of the major figure, Mathilde Loisel, in Maupassant's "The Necklace."
6. The ice, the organ, and the oil are important symbols in Eugene O'Neill's "Ile."
7. In "Young Goodman Brown," Hawthorne's allegory is developed through symbols, particularly the sunset, the walking-stick, and the path.
8. Hawthorne's message in "Young Goodman Brown" is both timely and Biblically sound.
9. In "Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night," Dylan Thomas urges his father to resist his imminent death by describing four kinds of men who "rage against the dying of the light."
10. During the visit of each of the three Christmas spirits, Scrooge gets valuable insights into his own character, which helps change him from a hard-hearted miser into a kind, charitable man.
11. In Dickens' *Great Expectations*, we witness a reformation of Pip's character as he develops compassion for Magwitch.
12. Although the two lovers in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* have many characteristics in common, Romeo is more emotional and impulsive; Juliet, more level-headed and resourceful.
13. In "The Cask of Amontillado," Poe uses dramatic and verbal irony to heighten the horror.
14. Each of the four characters in Hawthorne's "Dr. Heidegger's Experiment" represent an abstract idea: wasted beauty, wasted intelligence, wasted wealth, and wasted faith.
15. The horror in Shirley Jackson's "The Lottery" is achieved through her rudimentary but expert characterization, her almost clinically detached selection of details, and her deceptively simple diction.
16. Shirley Jackson demonstrates her extraordinary writing skills through the use of symbolism, setting, and point of view in "The Lottery."
17. Although both "Charles" and "The Lottery" were written by Shirley Jackson, they are absolutely contradictory in tone, theme, and style.
18. *Macbeth* by William Shakespeare is structured by three increasingly brutal murders.
19. The river in "By the Waters of Babylon" by Stephen Vincent Benet is a central symbol, which reveals a great deal about the main character and, at the same time, illustrates the theme.
20. In *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*, Thornton Wilder uses the lives of the five victims who die when the bridge falls to examine the relationship between life and death.

21. In "Rip Van Winkle," Washington Irving treats both Rip and Dame Van Winkle as comic stereotypes.
22. In "The Laboratory," Robert Browning portrays a diabolically evil woman whose monstrous nature is hidden beneath a facade of beauty and grace.
23. In "Lucas and Jake" the author, Paul Darcy Boles, shows Lucas' three outstanding traits: a desire to be recognized as special, a gift for storytelling, and a tendency to show off a little.
24. Woody Guthrie uses imagery and figurative language to celebrate America and to create an inspiring effect in his ballad, "This Land Is Your Land."
25. William Shakespeare, in "Sonnet 146," uses form, imagery, and diction to prove that the soul is much more important than the body.
26. Shakespeare's images in "Sonnet 30" are drawn from everyday business, banking, and the courtroom, but his use of them is creative, unusual, and excellent.
27. The central conflict in Willa Cather's "The Sculptor's Funeral" is one of values -- the materialistic, crass values of the townspeople in opposition to the aesthetic values of the sculptor.
28. In "Cargoes," John Masfield has chosen words with both pleasant and unpleasant connotations to suggest a contrast between the exotic romance of the old ships and the romantic utility of modern vessels.
29. Although the narrator in Poe's "The Tell-Tale Heart" tries to convince his audience that he is sane, his behavior throughout the story reveals a diseased mind that cannot distinguish between reality and fantasy.
30. In Chekhov's *The Bear*, love conquers anger, renunciation of womankind, and commitment to the dead.
31. "Song of the Sky Loom," "Calendar Fragments," and "Sun, My Relative" share a sense of harmony with nature, although the concept of nature varies among the three selections.
32. The central conflict in "Split Cherry Tree" is between two ways of life--an out-of-date tradition of toil and limited education, represented by Pa, and a new way of life based on scientific and technological progress, represented by Professor Herbert.
33. Richard Wright's novel *Native Son* is divided into three main sections: Fear, Flight, Fate.
34. Kafka's use of point of view is crucial to an understanding of the tone and meaning of "The Knock at the Gate."
35. In "Cold-Water Flat," Booth bases the poem's structure on a contrast between the success of the mythical Theseus, who escaped the Minotaur, and the failure of the modern Theseus from Dubuque, who is totally trapped in an urban environment.
36. "Leda and the Swan" by William Butler Yeats concerns itself primarily with the sudden descent of the bird/god, Leda's terror, the consummation, and speculations about what Leda's thoughts might have been.
37. In "Marian Anderson: Famous Concert Singer," the author's use of sensory details, facts, statistics, examples, and opinions arouses admiration for a woman who won international fame against tremendous odds.
38. In "The Mazarin Stone" by Arthur Conan Doyle, Sherlock Holmes uses a wax dummy, a notebook, and a gramophone to trick Sylvius into revealing where the Crown jewel is.
39. In "The Balek Scales," the set of scales, a traditional symbol for justice, ironically becomes a symbol for the corruption of justice by rich and powerful people.
40. In "The Secret Life of Walter Mitty," James Thurber uses dramatic irony to contrast the bold hero Mitty dreams of being with the meek person he is in real life.