

Thesis Guidelines

All history papers present an argument about how and why something happened. A thesis statement is a brief summary of your argument; it lets the reader know, as soon as possible, what argument the paper will make. The thesis statement is typically placed at the end of the first paragraph in a short essay.

A good thesis statement conveys a clear argument; it is clearly and forcefully supported by the rest of the paper, and all of the evidence in the paper pertains to it; it can be understood on its own, before one has read the essay.

Sample Assignment: How and why did Anne Hutchinson pose a threat to the established structures of power and authority in Puritan Massachusetts?

Not a thesis:

In this paper I will discuss how Anne Hutchinson posed a threat to the established structures of power and authority in Puritan Massachusetts.

(This is merely a restatement of the essay question.)

Also not a thesis:

Anne Hutchinson posed a threat to the Puritan leadership in the Massachusetts colony.

(This is a statement of fact, not an argument.)

The examples above do not work because a thesis is not merely a general subject for a paper, a statement of fact, or a restatement of the question. A thesis must stake claims that one could either argue for or against. A good way to ensure that you are constructing a thesis or argument is make sure that you include an argumentative word or phrase such as **because**, **due to**, or **as a result of**.

A good draft thesis:

*Anne Hutchinson posed a threat to the power and authority of the Puritan leadership **because** she was a woman, a popular preacher, and because of her religious convictions.*

This is an excellent draft thesis that summarizes the essay's main argument. From this thesis statement, the reader can tell that the essay will cover the threat that Anne posed to the Puritan leadership on account of her gender, her preaching activities, and her religious convictions; however, it could still be more specific.

A good thesis:

*Anne Hutchinson posed a threat to the power and authority of the Puritan leadership **because** she challenged conventional gender roles by acting as a popular preacher at a time when women were supposed to remain in the home, and because she shared her conviction that individuals could communicate directly with God and did not need the help of intermediaries.*

This is a better, more developed thesis statement because it explains how and why Anne Hutchinson's gender, preaching activities, and religious convictions threatened the authority of the Puritan establishment.

Basic Format for History Essays

History essays can be boiled down to some fairly simple components. All of them should contain a thesis statement, an introduction to and assessment of the source(s) being used, some historical context, evidence from primary sources, analysis of that evidence, and a conclusion. All of these elements come together to form an argument that seeks to explain HOW and WHY something happened the way it did.

- **Introductory paragraph**
 - o **Brief introduction** of your topic (2-4 sentences). Avoid clichés (starting your paper with the dictionary definition of a word) and overgeneralizations (“Since the dawn of time,” “Man has always,” “History shows,” etc.).
 - o **Thesis statement** (1-3 sentences) that conveys what you will argue in the body of the paper (the thesis statement should conclude your first paragraph). *It is often easiest to save this introductory paragraph for last and begin by writing your historical context, evaluation of sources, body, and conclusion. That way, when you come back to write your introduction, you know exactly what argument you have made in the body of the paper.*
- **Historical Context and Evaluation of Source(s):** Your second paragraph should introduce your primary source(s) and provide some historical context for it.
 - o Briefly provide any historical context that a non-specialist (e.g., a friend who is not taking this class) would need to understand your argument. This information should be drawn from lecture and the textbook.
 - o **What** source(s) are you using, **who** wrote it, **what** kind of source is it, **when** was it written, **why** was it written, and are there **any problems** with using it such as obvious bias or issues with the source of the author’s information (if so, how can we adjust for these issues)?
- **Body paragraphs:** Each body paragraph should support your thesis – there should be nothing tangential or off topic in your paper. The number of body paragraphs in these essays will depend on the length of the paper and the nature of your evidence (e.g., if you have 6 distinct points to make to support your argument, you will need at least 6 body paragraphs, one treating each distinct point). Each body paragraph should contain the following elements.
 - o **Topic sentence** in which you make a claim that you will then support with evidence from our primary sources.
 - o Presentation of **evidence** from our primary sources that supports the claim you made in your topic sentence. Evidence should be paraphrased unless there is a compelling reason to include a direct quote. Avoid block quotes (quotes that take up more than three lines of text).
 - o **Analysis** of that evidence that explains what the evidence means and how it supports your argument. Many students do a good job of making a claim and providing evidence for it, but forget to supply analysis. Remember that evidence does not speak for itself; you must explain to your reader how your evidence supports your argument.
- **Concluding paragraph**
 - o This usually contains a restatement of your argument and a summary of your most important points.