

How to state a thesis about an essay

Before you begin

What you need:

Related text: **“Seven Wonders” by Lewis Thomas**

Approximate time this exercise should take you: **20 minutes**

Reminder

What is a thesis statement about an essay? A thesis statement should include and explain your response to the essay you have chosen to write about. Generally, the term “response” refers to a position that agrees, disagrees or reacts to some of the major ideas put forth in the essay. Graders normally expect to find a student’s thesis statement in the opening paragraph of an essay.

How long is a thesis statement? A thesis statement usually includes a reaction and/or response to a main idea identified in the essay. One sentence is usually enough, but keep in mind that you have four hours in all and that you must write a 750-word essay. Try to make a thesis statement that is not too broad, so that you can support and develop it within the time and word-number constraints of the exam.

What does a thesis statement express? You have to do more than make a pronouncement or declare a position on the essay. You should clearly explain and state your reaction, setting up the theme you have identified and chosen to write about. A student thesis can also centre on an essay’s organizational pattern, such as techniques used by the author to present ideas. Your thesis statement should clearly identify the focus of your essay, your reaction to the author’s main ideas and theme, or your interpretation of the reading.

The “Writing Guidelines,” an important component of the Exit Exam documents, ask you to identify a main idea in the essay and to structure your own essay around a thesis statement that expresses your understanding of the observations or point of view presented in the essay you are writing about.

Instructions

This exercise will help you distinguish an acceptable thesis statement from an unacceptable one as a reaction-response to an essay you have chosen to write about.

Read the following sentences and identify them as acceptable or unacceptable by placing an X following the correct answer.

Exercise 1

1. “Seven Wonders” is all about the amazing things in the world that surround us. He gives us many examples on his list. He includes seven choices.
 Acceptable _____ Unacceptable _____

2. “Seven Wonders” is an inspiring essay on one man’s ideas about his own choices of “wonders” in the world (and it is difficult to disagree with most of his choices).
 Acceptable _____ Unacceptable _____

3. Thomas has written about what he thinks are major wonders in the world but his list is outdated and he should add new things to his list, like space travel for instance; in my essay I will react to his choices but also give a few of my own choices.
 Acceptable _____ Unacceptable _____

4. It is true that we like to wonder about the world around us, but pollution is more important than wondering about little insects, and I will show why we must start cleaning up the environment or we are all doomed.
 Acceptable _____ Unacceptable _____

5. Thomas has written an essay using enumeration and examples to build towards his conclusion that humans are the number-one amazing thing that makes us wonder. In my essay, I will show why he has made the best choice and why humans for sure make us wonder the most.
 Acceptable _____ Unacceptable _____

6. The “Seven Wonders” essay uses many examples to lead us towards the author’s logical conclusion that the planet Earth is the most amazing thing we have to think about.
 Acceptable _____ Unacceptable _____

7. The wonders chosen by the author are bad choices because they were chosen after the author probably had a little too much wine with his dinner. It seems he really did not think about his ideas all that much.

Acceptable_____ Unacceptable_____

8. Thomas's essay is all about wondering, and I am left wondering what the essay is really all about because he only talks about cells and insects. What about computers and the internet and e-mail for example?

Acceptable_____ Unacceptable_____

9. "Seven Wonders" presents the seven choices of one person but it is as much about our need to wonder about the world around us in general and where we are heading, something even more on our minds since the new millennium.

Acceptable_____ Unacceptable_____

10. "Seven Wonders" is more about where we are going than where we come from and what we are all about. He uses his choices of seven things from the present to make us wonder about our future.

Acceptable_____ Unacceptable_____

Answer key

1. **Unacceptable.** This sentence is unacceptable as a thesis statement because it is really just a pronouncement and simple summary. The student takes no clear position on the reading and presents no reaction to what Thomas has to say. There is no element of reaction-response to the Thomas text.
2. **Acceptable.** This sentence is acceptable as a thesis statement because the student has presented an identifiable reaction-response to the reading. You are allowed to disagree with what the author is saying as well.
3. **Acceptable.** Here the student has disagreed somewhat with the author but has stayed on topic and reacted with some personal choices. As long as the essay includes some reaction to Thomas's choices and does not talk only about the student's own choices, it will be acceptable.
4. **Unacceptable.** An essay centred on pollution would be seen as off-topic unless there are much stronger links than this to what Thomas is saying in his essay. You must deal with the text you have chosen and not only impose your own ideas on other topics, no matter how interesting they might be.
5. **Unacceptable.** Humans are certainly mentioned in the essay but the planet Earth as a whole is Thomas's number-one thing to wonder about. An essay defending humans as the number-one choice for Thomas would be seen as a misread of a very important part of the original essay.
6. **Acceptable.** This hints at techniques being the organizational basis of the essay and agrees with the author's number-one choice.
7. **Unacceptable.** The author does mention being invited to a dinner party, but he also says that he did not make his list for that occasion. The list he provides indicates that he must have thought seriously about it for some time.
8. **Unacceptable.** This statement is right in saying that wonder is a theme in the essay, but it then confuses the nature of wondering in general and misreads the essay in concluding it is only about insects and cells. Thomas does mention other important things.

9. **Acceptable.** The wonder theme is correctly identified as a major theme in the essay and the student realizes Thomas has hit on an interesting topic.
10. **Acceptable.** This could be interesting as an essay thesis because of what it does with what Thomas is saying at the end of his essay.

How to state a thesis about an essay

Before you begin

What you need:

Related text: **“Seven Wonders” by Lewis Thomas**

Approximate time this exercise should take you: **15 minutes**

Reminder

Your thesis statement should include and explain your response to the essay you have chosen to write about, setting out a position that agrees or disagrees with some of the major ideas put forth in the essay.

Generally, the term “response” refers to a reaction to the ideas presented in the essay or the literary techniques used by the essay writer, including things such as argumentation techniques, use of a personal voice, control of tone, examples and contrasts, or rhetorical questions to get ideas across. Choose two or three techniques you feel help to explain the thesis.

The “Writing Guidelines,” an important component of the Exit Exam documents, ask you to identify a main idea in the essay and to structure your own essay around a thesis statement that expresses your understanding of the observations or point of view presented in the essay you are writing about.

Instructions

Now that we have examined examples of acceptable and unacceptable possible thesis statements about the “Seven Wonders” essay in **Module 10, Exercise 1**, you will write your own thesis statement to form the basis of your response essay. Following the steps in this exercise will help you organize your ideas into a valid thesis statement of your own choosing.

This exercise presents a three-step approach that you can use to help you write a valid thesis statement. Step 1 asks you to list three main ideas in the text you are writing about. Step 2 asks you to focus on one of those ideas and what you want to do with it. Step 3 asks you to write an actual thesis statement that will become the focus of your essay.

Exercise 2

STEP 1

List up to three main ideas, three major topics, or three unifying observations you have identified in “Seven Wonders.” You may draw on ideas from other practice exercises or simply work with your own reading of Thomas’s essay.

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

STEP 2

The essay that you write will centre on one of the ideas identified above. What observations can you make about one or more of the ideas listed in step 1? Do you agree or disagree with what he is saying? How do you feel about his observations? About his choices of wonders? About his wonderment in general? About the number-one choice on his list? About the way he has structured his essay? About the way he writes in general? Write your response on the lines below.

STEP 3

Now you must make a choice from your three possible ideas and write a unifying thesis statement of one or two sentences that will become the focus of your essay. Remember to clearly state to your readers what you are going to write about (topic) and to clearly identify your topic and your claim about the issues raised by Thomas. You may use the first-person “I” if you wish, as long as you do not exaggerate your use of “I” statements in your final essay.

Answer key

STEP 1

Here are some examples of main ideas in the “Seven Wonders” essay. You might have listed others and they will be valid as long as they are important ideas raised by Thomas in his observations.

- the wonders of our planet
- the whole idea of wonder and wondering
- the place of humans (man) in the scheme of things (the significance or insignificance of man overall)
- the marvels of our world, big and small
- things people “wonder” about
- what the future holds for planet earth
- humans versus other species on earth
- one person’s choice of wonders of the world

STEP 2

Your thesis must reflect your own take, your own reaction to the ideas, themes, and observations you have identified, and your own interpretation of the “Seven Wonders” text. What you write in response to the themes and observations about the world that Thomas makes in his original essay should be your own reactions expressed in your own way. They will be valid and considered acceptable as long as they make sense, and as long as they reflect themes and concerns in the Thomas essay. The list above makes it clear that, as is the case with most good essays, there is a good variety of topics to choose from.

STEP 3

Be sure your thesis statement indicates where you are going in your essay. It should comment directly on central ideas in “Seven Wonders” and make a claim that is neither too broad nor too narrow for development in a 750-word essay.

Here are two thesis statements on “Seven Wonders” from the Marking Guide, May 2004, 17th edition:

- Using an academic yet personal writing style, Thomas explains to the reader how one can find wonder in the most unexpected places.
- In his essay “Seven Wonders,” through description of life forms as minute as bacteria to those as complex as human beings, Lewis Thomas explains that the most precious and miraculous elements of the world are to be found everywhere.