

How to Write a Research Paper Proposal

Your research paper proposal needs to have three components:

1. A working title
2. A thesis statement
3. A bibliography

1. *Working Title*

A working title simply means a title for your research paper that best describes what the research paper is all about. It must be descriptive and crisp. You want to grab your reader's attention and describe the focus of your paper. The reason why it's called a "working title" is that you may change it, if needed, as you progress in writing your paper and get a better sense of the material.

2. *Thesis Statement*

a. What is a Thesis Statement?

Almost all of us—even if we don't do it consciously—look early in a research paper for a one-or two-sentence condensation of the argument or analysis that is to follow. We refer to that condensation as a thesis statement.

b. Why Should Your Essay Contain a Thesis Statement?

- To test your ideas by distilling them into a sentence or two
- To better organize and develop your argument
- To provide your reader with a "guide" to your argument

In general, your thesis statement will accomplish these goals if you think of the thesis as the answer to the question your paper explores.

c. How Can You Write a Good Thesis Statement?

Here are some helpful hints to get you started.

Your thesis statement needs to answer a question about the issue you'd like to explore. In this situation, your job is to figure out what question you'd like to write about.

A good thesis statement will usually include the following four attributes:

- Take on a subject upon which reasonable people could disagree
- Deal with a subject that can be adequately treated given the nature of the assignment
- Express one main idea supported by various other
- Assert your conclusions about a subject

Let's see how to generate a thesis statement for a media studies research paper.

Brainstorm the topic.

Let's say that your class focuses upon the problems race in the media. You find that you are interested in the problems of representations of China and the Chinese by Western media. You then set up a brief sketch of your ideas by coming up with a possible list of ideas that you could examine: specific theories about representation of ethnicity, the specific question of representations of race in media, the case of China and how this might offer particular insight into both the mechanisms of representation and the homogeneous notions of race that are quite pervasive in many societies today.

You start out with a thesis statement like this:

Chinese in the media.

This fragment isn't a thesis statement. Instead, it simply indicates a general subject. Furthermore, your reader doesn't know what you want to say about Chinese in the media.

Narrow the topic

Your readings about the topic have led you to the conclusion that not only are western media representations of China flawed, but so too are the west's representations of the Chinese people. You see there is a connection between the colonial attitude of western countries towards the nation of China and the media representations of both China and its people

You change your thesis to look like this:

Representations of race and Chinese and China in the media .

This fragment is extremely confusing and does not make clear what you are going to do. Additionally the wording obfuscates meaning.

Try this:

Western representations of China subtly insinuate a colonial gaze which underscores American superiority while these very same representations reveal a bias against the Chinese as a people whose government necessarily shrouds their intellectual ability.

This sentence is much stronger because you present your subject within a larger analytic paradigm. This statement is more specific, but it isn't a thesis. Your thesis is lacking a clear direction in terms of where you are heading with this idea and who maintains these notions of bias (ie. you, an author?) . And what sort of bias? And what is the relationship between the Chinese and their government that representations would be incapable of distinguishing one from the other?

Use specific language.

You decide to explain what you mean about “bias”, so you write:

According to Ahmed, Western representations of China subtly insinuate a colonial gaze which emphasizes American superiority while also revealing a racial bias against the Chinese as a people whose government necessarily shrouds their intellectual ability. Not only is this colonial gaze part of a larger political problem from west to east, but more importantly the racial bias towards the Chinese people is dependent upon the colonial gaze surveilling their government, economic practices and ecological status are part of a political tautology which seeks to revert to age old clichés of the Chinese as bifurcated.

This is far better than your previous draft, but still terms are unclear and your intent in this paper is not formed. What will you be examining?

Now take a position on the topic.

After reflecting on the topic a little while longer and rereading one of the texts by Jamila Ahmed, you decide that what you really want to say about this topic is more complex than the source you paraphrase above.

You revise your thesis to look like this:

According to Ahmed, Western representations of China subtly insinuate a colonial gaze which underscores American superiority while also revealing a racial bias against the Chinese as a people whose government necessarily shrouds their intellectual ability. Not only is this colonial gaze part of a larger political problem from west to east, but more importantly the racial bias towards the Chinese people is dependent upon the colonial gaze surveilling their government, economic practices and ecological status are part of a political tautology which seeks to revert to age old clichés of the Chinese as bifurcated: from the studious, hardworking and mathematically gifted to the smoking, rude, spitting, pushy, polluting, politically oppressed Chinese subject.

This is a well-written thesis statement clearly demonstrated your ideas about one specific topic, presented in terms of the research you have begun, focussing on a textual reference or idea, and demonstrating within your thesis the direction you plan to take your query in relation to that author or idea and setting up a clear and realizable goal.

d. How to Tell a Strong Thesis Sentence from a Weak One?

- **A strong thesis takes some sort of stand.**

Remember that your thesis needs to show your conclusions about a subject. For example, if you are writing a paper for a class on fitness, you might be asked to choose a popular weight-loss product to evaluate. Here are two thesis statements:

There are some negative and positive aspects to the Banana Herb Tea Supplement.

This is a weak thesis. First, it fails to take a stand. Second, the phrase “negative and positive” aspects” are vague.

Because Banana Herb Tea Supplement promotes rapid weight loss that results in the loss of muscle and lean body mass, it poses a potential danger to customers.

This is a stronger thesis because it takes a stand but still lacks any analytic axis and clear development of thought (ie. what will you be saying specifically about this subject?).

• **A strong thesis justifies discussion.**

Your thesis should indicate the point of the discussion. If your assignment is to write a paper on kinship systems, using your own family as an example, you might come up with either of these two thesis statements:

My family is an extended family.

This is a weak thesis because it states an observation. Your reader won’t be able to tell the point of the statement, and will probably stop reading.

While most American families would view consanguineal marriage as a threat to the nuclear family structure, many Iranian families, like my own, believe that these marriages help reinforce kinship ties in an extended family.

This is a strong thesis because it shows how your experience contradicts a widely-accepted view. A good strategy for creating a strong thesis is to show that the topic is controversial. Readers will be interested in reading the rest of the essay to see how you support your point.

• **A strong thesis expresses one main idea.**

Readers need to be able to see that your paper has one main point. If your thesis expresses more than one idea, then you might confuse your readers about the subject of your paper. For example:

Companies need to exploit the marketing potential of the Internet, and web pages can provide both advertising and customer support.

This is a weak thesis statement because the reader can’t decide whether the paper is about marketing on the Internet or web pages. To revise the thesis, the relationship between the two ideas needs to become more clear. One way to revise the thesis would be to write:

Because the Internet is filled with tremendous marketing potential, companies should exploit this potential by using web pages that offer both advertising and customer support.

This is a strong thesis because it shows that the two ideas are related. Hint: a great many clear and engaging thesis statements contain words like “because,” “since,” “so,” “although,” “unless,” and “however”.

- **A strong thesis statement is specific.**

A thesis statement should show exactly what your paper will be about, and will help you keep your paper to a manageable topic.

For example, if you write a paper on hunger, you might say:

World hunger has many causes and effects.

This is a weak thesis statement for two major reasons. First, “world hunger” can’t be discussed thoroughly in five or ten pages. Second, “many causes and effects” is vague. You should be able to identify specific causes and effects. A revised thesis might look like this:

Hunger persists in Appalachia because jobs are scarce and farming in the infertile soil is rarely profitable.

This is a strong thesis because it narrows the subject to a more specific and manageable topic and it also identifies the specific causes for the existence of hunger.

3. *Bibliography*

Your research paper proposal must have a bibliography. This is a list of 4-5 books, book chapters, articles, etc., that you have carefully read in relation to your research paper, and which address aspects of your thesis question. You may not have finished all your reading before you submit your proposal for your final paper, but you should have read at least three sources upon which to build.