**Forming a thesis statement**

A Thesis statement is: What do I want to say about this topic. I want you to argue a point. As I read about Sumerian Literature I form an idea about how it impacted civilization or society. I might want to say something like: The most significant pieces of literature were . . . . Then, my essay needs to explain **why** they were significant. I might want to say that they revolutionized society, or literature, or politics, or religion, or. . . . Then I must defend my thesis. Don’t write a report. Don’t give me lame thesis statements like: “Literature was very important,” followed by brief descriptions of some pieces of literature. You MUST tell me WHY the literature “was important.” I had one genius write: “Greek religion was polytheistic.” You think? Gee, I wonder if he could prove that! Try using the reporter questions: Who, what, why, when, where, and how; see if that helps.

Creating a thesis statement takes some time to think and process what you have read. A thesis statement is not something you can vomit out in five minutes. Think about it: How has your topic impacted the society or civilization? Who are the important thinkers or participants in that field and how and why did they make such an impact? Word of advice: after you have formulated what you think is a good thesis statement **check with the instructor who can help you shape your thesis statement**. Eventually, when you write your thesis statement, you will put it in **bold** print. This is so I can see what you think is a thesis statement and for many, the inability to do this demonstrates that you don’t really have a thesis statement.

Writing your essay.

First, create an outline. You will need an introduction, a body, and a conclusion. Two phases of this: First, the technical. An introduction should give some background about my topic. The intro should also have my thesis statement (in bold), as well as an indication of the direction my essay is going to take. By the time I finish reading your intro, I should know what it’s about and where you are taking me on this ride. Example: My Sumerian literature introd could mention them as the first writers, that they invented writing, etc. Then My thesis statement: Sumerian Literature produced some of the most significant literature of the ancient Near East. After that I will indicate that I’m going to demonstrate this through works such as the Epic of Gilgamesh, The Creation Epic, and theological myths. (Now what I’ve done is also given my outline!).

What follows in the body is a discussion of those three works, each with its own paragraph. Yet, here’s the **important aspect**. In each of those I have to keep referring back to my thesis statement and demonstrate in each case how and why it impacted the ancient Near East. This is where most students get in trouble. They fail to keep their thesis statement in mind. Keep hammering that statement and prove your point!

Finally, a conclusion should summarize your essay.

Now **important** second phase: You must cite your sources. Very simple, but students cannot seem to do this. I want parenthetical references, which should include the author’s last name and the page number you found the information on. It should look like this: **(Smith, 52).** Note, the period goes after the closing parenthesis, not in front of the note.

Part of these “second phase instructions” involves the use of your source. **DO NOT QUOTE!** I want you to put what you find in your own words. This process involves more than just rearranging the words. Use your vocabulary, not the authors! If you use seventy five percent of the author’s words, even if you change their order, it is still **plagiarism**. You will be hammered hard for this. Indeed, if you don’t know the meaning of a word, don’t include thinking it will sound good. Trust me, your instructor is not an idiot and he can rapidly discern whether you know what you are talking about or not. Use your words. Now, the other extreme is using slang or colloquial. One student wrote about how the Persians “got all up in the Greek’s grill, so they threw down.” (I swear, this is an actual quote). This takes some effort. Once again, it is not a process that can be done in twenty minutes. Assume the reader does not know anything about your topic, so be specific and clear.

One other thing about plagiarism is that of stealing ideas. I want you to compose something. You are still plagiarizing if you take the author’s first sentence and put it in your own words, then the author’s second sentence, put it in your own words, then the author’s third sentence, put it in your own words, then the author’s fourth sentence. . . . You get the idea. I want you to form your own opinion about your topic. Your sources simply become items that **PROVE YOUR POINT.** I want to read your ideas, not the author’s.

Third phase: **Write with proper grammar**. When you first write your essay, just write it as a first draft. Get your ideas on paper. Then, go back and edit it. Here are some things **NOT** to do:

1. Do not use First Person (we, our, us, I, me) or second tense (you and your)

2. Do not use contractions (You just can’t do it)

3. **No more than two passives** (was, were, would, could, had . . . ) Use active past tense (“ed” verbs) and do not turn it into present tense (using “is” to escape the “was”); Passive voice is your instructor’s biggest pet peeve. **Do not simply turn it into present tense!** Go back and work at composing sentences without the passive voice; usually this can be done by specifying your subject. For example, “Poems were written by priests” can be changed into “Priests wrote poems.” Or, “Arrows were used to destroy the enemy.” Well, what’s your subject? Better: “Archers used arrows to destroy the enemy.” A little practice in this area and your writing style will improve one hundred percent. Trust me on this one.

4. Do not start sentences with conjunctions (and, but, however)

5. Do not use “This” or “That” as a subject. They are demonstrative pronouns (they modify a noun).

6. Do not use vague pronouns (in other words, each “he,” “she,” “it,” and “they” should refer back to a specific subject.

7. Oh, and do not use the word “Thing.” Be specific.

8. Lose the phrase “a lot.”

9. Do not make grand sweeping statements about the ancients and “us today.”

10. Remember, Criticism of your paper is not criticism of you. When you hand in the paper, this ceases to be about YOU. Now it becomes a matter of you and I getting together and dissecting this essay that we have; My comments about the paper are about the paper, NOT YOU.

When you are done with your essay, use the spell check to catch silly mistakes. Also, I encourage you to not be afraid to use your grammar check. That feature does not always give a better reading, but it sometimes helps catch silly grammatical errors, and thus help you learn to recognize them. Also, watch out for confusion with words such as “there” and “their.”

**VI. Step Five: What to hand in**.