

EXERCISE

The Thesis Statement

PART A: Read the following one-paragraph summaries and write a concise thesis sentence that synthesizes and conveys the main analytical conclusion(s) in it.¹

Consumer’s Question: How strong is support for terminally ill patients’ “right to die”?

SUMMARY: In the debate regarding assisted suicide, there are those who believe that a person is alive as long as she continues to breathe. They say that death must remain a natural occurrence, and not something to be caused or facilitated by human interference. However, the example of Karen Quinlan, a woman declared permanently comatose in hospital, brings to light the common sense in the use of assisted suicide. Although Karen Quinlan continued to breathe for nine years, Karen died to her family and friends when she became comatose. There is no justification to maintain that the simple act of breathing qualifies as life. Keeping utterly debilitated patients alive with the help of medication and technology simply perpetuates the suffering of the patient and her loved ones. It serves no better purpose than imposing a financial burden on the patient's family and draining the limited resources of society. For these reasons, Karen Quinlan should have been allowed to die.

THESIS
STATEMENT:

¹ *Adapted from materials by John Jay College of Criminal Justice, City University of New York. Funded by the U.S. Department of Education (Title V) and the New York State Education Department (Perkins III)*

Consumer’s Question: Do Americans have equal opportunities ?

SUMMARY: America is hailed as a land of equal opportunities. Founded on the principle that “all men are created equal,” it is regarded by many as a country where a person is not discriminated against on the basis of race, ethnicity, gender or religious conviction. However, a look at the history of the U.S. over the centuries and a closer look at the state of minorities in the present day America reveal quite a different picture. Despite the various struggles fought and the many victories won to do away with discrimination and to create an even playing field where individuals can utilize their potential, opportunities are still not equally available to all members of American society. Women are paid less than men for the same work, and they are obviously underrepresented in government. Blacks and Hispanics make up a small percentage of the workforce in top positions but a large percentage of those who live in poverty. The poor members of society, regardless of gender, race, or ethnicity, confront a world of hardships and limited opportunities to improve their lives. For these reasons, some people think America is a land of equal opportunities, and others believe that it is not.

THESIS
STATEMENT:

Consumer’s Question: Does trying teenagers in adult courts work?

SUMMARY: Most of us have probably done at least one risky, dangerous or even illegal thing in our lives - most likely during our teenage years. As teenagers, we probably did not consider the long-term consequences of our actions; we were just out trying to have a good time, to be accepted by our peers. Imagine, for example, that after attending a party and being only “mildly intoxicated,” you decide to drive home. While driving, you fall asleep and accidentally kill another driver. If caught, tried and sentenced as an adult - as many today believe is appropriate - you might end up spending many years in prison, exposed to dangerous, hardened criminals three times your age. This one poor decision, and all your hopes and plans for a productive and meaningful life are wasted! How many young lives need to be destroyed before society realizes that sentencing teenagers as adults is inappropriate and excessive in a just society? Teenagers do not have the same intellectual or emotional capabilities as adults. Furthermore, serving sentences in adult prisons is dangerous both to society and the young offender.

THESIS
STATEMENT:

PART B: Rewrite the following thesis statements to make them work better. Compare your rewrites with those recommended on page 4.²

1) “In this essay I will try to prove that drugs such as Prozac and Paxil are unnecessary and probably dangerous.”

2) “In his novel The Long Walk, it seems as if Stephen King is attempting to make a statement about the evils of laissez-faire capitalism, and in my opinion the characters and settings reflected this well.”

3) “The Great Gatsby is inarguably the best-written novel of the last 100 years, leaving millions of readers with either a renewed or disenchanted view of the “American Dream.”

4) “The cost of a college education is rising sharply.”

6) “In The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, Robert Louis Stevenson symbolizes English upper and lower-class society.”

² Used with permission. © University of Richmond Writer’s Web

NOTES (by University of Richmond Writer's Web):

- 1) Writing "in this essay I will prove x" does not express how or why you are making your argument, so it should be avoided whenever possible. A better form of this thesis would refer to the main reasoning behind the claim, allowing the reader to predict how the paper will unfold. For example, "Because of the inconclusive evidence for the usefulness of drugs such as Prozac or Paxil to treat depression, their widespread usage should be more carefully scrutinized" would be a more specific thesis which better outlines the paper's argument.
- 2) This thesis has two main problems: lack of specific evidence and too much hedging. The author should reference specific aspects of the book which suggest this interpretation in order to make a stronger and more acceptable claim. Additionally, the use of "it seems" and "in my opinion" weaken the claim by showing that the author may not believe his or her own words on this subject. A better thesis might be "Stephen King's The Long Walk exemplifies the evils of laissez-faire capitalism through its depiction of the main characters' competition amongst themselves, alienation from each other, and exploitation by commercial media."
- 3) While The Great Gatsby does thematically allude to the "American Dream," this is a "swashbuckling" thesis which makes too grand of a statement to be effectively supported in simply one essay, or even in one book. The author should specify under what context he or she is judging The Great Gatsby (American novels? 20th-century novels across the world? 20th-century Western novels?) and refer to the main reasoning behind this assertion (Is it the strength of the thematic elements? The descriptive prose? The witty dialogue?). In other words, the author has not established the HOW (context) and WHY (reasoning) of the thesis. A better version of this thesis might state "The Great Gatsby is widely regarded one of the best 20th-century American novels due to its rich symbolism: success, knowledge, corruption and alienation are but a few of the themes explored in Fitzgerald's novel, but together they form a meaningful commentary on living the American Dream."
- 4) This is statement cannot act as a thesis because it does not answer a question or make an arguable claim. It cannot be disputed that college education is generally becoming more expensive, but the reader will ask "so what?" This statement can act as evidence to support a governing claim, but the governing claim should address a larger question which requires multiple pieces of evidence to support it. A more expansive thesis might something like: "While a college education is meant to be a gateway for any citizen to achieve success through hard work, the rising cost of college tuition along with more difficult loan-application processes have made attending college more and more a socioeconomic class-based activity."
- 5) In The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, Robert Louis Stevenson symbolizes the disparity between upper and lower-class society through the opposing physical and psychological characteristics of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde.