

Student Activity 2: What a Thesis Statement Does

This activity goes beyond Activity 1 by focusing on three key tasks that any a good thesis statement must perform. Your thesis statement should:

1. **Make a claim you can back up with evidence and with your general background knowledge.** The claim must not be too broad or vague. It should be related closely to the evidence provided by the primary sources you will write about.
2. **Address ALL aspects of the essay question.** A common error is to answer a question that was not asked or to answer only part of the question that was asked. Your thesis statement should respond to each part of the DBQ or other essay question.
3. **Act as a guide in helping you organize the entire essay.** A good thesis statement can help you decide what the key parts of your essay will be, and in what order.

Your assignment: On the next page of this handout, you will find the same DBQ as in Activity 1. This is followed by five thesis statements and then five descriptions. A blank space is provided next to each description. In that space, write the number of the thesis statement that matches the description. *Two of the thesis statements meet all three of the standards here for an effective thesis statement.* The others fail to meet some or all of these standards. Read the descriptions carefully and you will learn how to avoid common mistakes in writing a thesis statement. As a class, discuss the choices you have made.

(Finish the assignment by turning to the next page of this handout.)

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The DBQ: *Describe the Haymarket defendants' beliefs about violence, and explain why those beliefs did or did not justify the great fear many in Chicago felt toward the anarchists during their trial.*

Five thesis statement about the Haymarket anarchists:

The anarchists' beliefs about violence actually made sense. Given how bad industrial conditions in Chicago were in the 1880s, no other political strategy could have worked for labor.

1. In the hard times of the late 1880s, the anarchists were sure that real efforts to reform society would lead to violence. However, they did not want violence or practice it themselves, and so the public's fears about them were not justified.
2. The anarchists blamed labor violence on the bosses. Yet some anarchists also praised dynamite for giving the workers a threat to use against those bosses. Given this fact and the hard times in Chicago in 1886, the public's hysteria and its fears about the anarchists are understandable.
3. The anarchists believed real efforts to bring about social change would lead to violence, but they did not want that violence or practice it themselves.
4. The anarchists were not really that frightening. As Carl Sandburg shows, the public reaction to them was an example of hate-filled mass hysteria.

Match the five thesis statements with these descriptions:

- a. _____ This thesis statement only responds in a direct way to the first half of the DBQ.
- b. _____ This thesis statement also only responds to the first part of the DBQ. Then instead of responding to the second part of the DBQ, it makes claims about economic conditions that can't be backed up with the primary sources provided.
- c. _____ This thesis statement does respond to both parts of the DBQ. However, it is too vague about the anarchists' views. Also, by referring to one of the primary sources, it loses its value as a general claim or overall thesis.
- d. _____ This thesis statement achieves all three tasks. It explains what the anarchists' views of violence were and evaluates the public reaction to them. It also hints at how to organize the essay so as to explain those views, explain why they were threatening, and finally explain why the public reaction was justified.
- e. _____ This thesis statement achieves all three tasks. It explains what the anarchists' views of violence were and evaluates the public reaction to them. It also hints at a way to organize the essay so as to explain those views, explain why they were not threatening, and why the public reaction was not justified.

As a class, discuss your choices.