

JEFFREY R. WILSON  
**WRITING GOOD THESIS STATEMENTS**

**Objectives:** This activity is designed to help students understand the features of a good thesis statement.

**Readings:** William Shakespeare, *Hamlet* (ca. 1599)

**Instructions:**

1. On the back of this sheet are a number of thesis statements about *Hamlet*. Read through these thesis statements. Mark which ones you think are the best and which ones you think are the worst.
  
2. In a small group of three or four, rank what your group sees as the top three thesis statements and the bottom three. Discuss why you like or don't like the statements you've ranked. What are these thesis statements doing that you like or don't like. Additionally, what open questions do you have about writing a thesis statement ("When writing a thesis, should we do X or Y?")
  
3. Coming back together as a class, list out the thesis statements people tended to like and dislike. Discuss why these statements are successful or not. Most importantly, start to list out the features of good vs. bad thesis statements.
  
4. With the features of a good thesis statement in mind, take a shot at writing out your own thesis statement for your first essay, as it currently stands.

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1. Shakespeare prompts questions about succession in *Hamlet*, and deliberately doesn't answer them.
2. As illustrated in this essay, Shakespeare's Denmark is rampant with religious hypocrisy; characters use religion to legitimate their actions much more than they use religion to determine what those actions should be.
3. Shakespeare showed the tragic power of disappointment and anger by having the Ghost of King Hamlet produce a wildly perverse punishment for his widow: the Ghost prevents Hamlet from punishing his mother, not out of love, but out of a desire to see her punish herself (through her tortured conscience) and indeed to see heaven punish her (by sending her to hell).
4. Is it possible then that Hamlet is both suffering from a subtle madness that strengthens throughout the duration of the play, and is still clever enough most of the time to feign an outrageous madness to lead Claudius, Polonius, and Gertrude away from his true thoughts?
5. In this essay, I contend that Fortinbras honors Hamlet, not out of any genuine admiration, but rather to consolidate political power.
6. Hamlet has two audiences that he's performing for, and his humor means two different things to these two different audiences: it means "madness" to the other characters on stage, but it means "intelligence" to us in the audience.
7. As long as Hamlet is lost in the world of acting, he cannot take action.
8. Shakespeare uses imagery of the bestial and the divine as a characterization of Hamlet's suspension between action and inaction. In this way, Shakespeare asserts that action stems from impulsive, bestial instincts while inaction demonstrates a divine wisdom and reasoning.
9. Shakespeare uses this interesting scene construction to show drama's effect on a guilty mind. Though what is even more intriguing is his use of it twice.
10. In this essay, I argue that Shakespeare has set a conflict between logic and emotion in the conscience. He uses the royal family—Claudius, Hamlet, and Gertrude—to demonstrate different types of conscience and their influences.
11. Hamlet must know for a fact that he is not killing Claudius behind the curtain and that it must in fact be Polonius.
12. Although Hamlet and Claudius live and die as enemies, they display more similarities in character than their opposing circumstances suggest. That is, Hamlet's resemblance to Claudius detracts from the prince's credibility as the faultless hero, and Claudius's resemblance to Hamlet casts doubt upon the king's role as the ruthless villain.
13. Though Ophelia is misled by superficiality – she even claimed that "beauty had better commerce with honesty" (3.1.109) than anything else – she is a victim of society as a whole, more specifically of Claudius' and Polonius' manipulation, Hamlet's frustration, and the human "flesh" (3.1.63) to which she is heir, making her minimally accountable for her own fate.
14. I want to suggest that Shakespeare's *Hamlet* includes a radical feminist critique of misogyny. It does so by depicting overbearing men controlling their wives and daughters, sure, but even more tragically by showing those women internalize the misogyny they experience and redirect it toward other women.
15. Shakespeare, wishing to unmask the mental disarray that befalls and temporarily immobilizes every future murderer, illustrates this circuitous process of coming to terms with murder through Hamlet's changing his conception of death from a state of eternal repose under the aegis of salvation to one of perdition, and finally, to one primarily characterized by the corruption and befoulment of the physical body.
16. Rather than "revenge" his father's murder, Hamlet chooses to "remember" him by means of impersonation. His tribute does not succeed on its own terms and in fact brings him closer to his uncle than his father.