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### What is the Point? Teaching Ideas for Thesis Sentences

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## WHAT IS THE POINT? Teaching Ideas for Thesis Sentences

Kathleen Elliott Vinson  
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Using effective thesis sentences can dramatically improve a document by making it more reader-friendly and improving the author's writing and analysis skills. Thus, it benefits both the writer and reader. It forces writers to focus on their organization, sharpen their understanding of the legal issues, and continuously ask themselves - **what is the point** of this paragraph? Stating the point in thesis sentences also benefits readers, by guiding them throughout the document. After all, judges, lawyers, and clients expect to see the bottom line up front and have no time or tolerance to search for a buried point or conclusion in a document. Indeed, they are extremely busy and therefore, they can be impatient readers.

Many sources discuss and stress the importance of thesis sentences, yet they remain a common problem in students' writing. For example, in many legal writing texts, as well as legal writing classes and academic support programs, students are instructed to use thesis sentences to enhance their writing skills and facilitate readers' understanding. Students' memos and briefs, however, often lack thesis sentences. Below is a summary of teaching ideas to utilize when discussing thesis sentences. The ideas incorporate teaching methods that will benefit students with various learning styles. Perhaps using one, if not all of these methods, will help students understand **the point**.

Define thesis sentences in order to demystify them. Write the definition on the board and/or in a handout and read aloud the definition. Many students get confused by the terminology. For example, they get thesis paragraphs and thesis sentences confused because they both include the word "thesis." Also, topic sentences and thesis sentences are sometimes used interchangeably and can cause confusion.

Compare and contrast a thesis sentence with a topic sentence and a thesis paragraph. Show a sample topic sentence next to a sample thesis sentence. Use imagery to illustrate the similarities of a thesis paragraph and thesis sentence. For example, just as a thesis paragraph serves as the road map of the document by laying out the organizational framework, thesis sentences serve as street signs for the reader, by stating the points of each paragraph.

Show good and bad examples of thesis sentences. Discuss what is good or bad about the samples. Ask the students how they could be improved. Discuss the purpose of thesis sentences.

Write thesis sentences. Start with a non-legal example then move on to a legal issue students are familiar with based on one of their legal writing memos or briefs.

Edit/Self-Critique thesis sentences through three methods: highlighting, copying and pasting, and cutting.

a. Highlighting.

When students hand in a draft of their brief or memo, ask them to highlight the thesis sentences in the document. Students should then draw an arrow from every sentence in a paragraph to the thesis sentence of that paragraph. Check to see if every sentence relates to the point in the thesis sentence of the paragraph.

b. Copying and Pasting.

When handing in their draft of a brief or memo, ask students to copy and paste all of their thesis sentences onto one separate page and attach it to their document. Students can check their organization by reviewing the thesis sentences.

c. Cutting.

Perhaps the most compelling exercise that drives the point home is to cut out the first sentence of every paragraph in an extra copy of a student's document. Each sentence should be on a separate slip of paper. Fold the slips of paper and put them in a hat or bowl. Bring them to class and ask each student to pick out a slip of paper and read it aloud. Then ask the students if the sentence is an effective thesis sentence or how it could be improved. Ask the students to see if they can identify what section of the argument/discussion the sentence most likely belongs in (is it a thesis sentence in the explanation section or application section?) Students will quickly realize that many of the sentences that need improvement tend to merely state a specific fact in a case rather than **the point** of the case.