How to Write a History Thesis

Each history thesis should include a **precise opinion or claim** and the essay’s **supporting points or line of reasoning** in arguing for that opinion.

The thesis is usually placed at the **end of the introduction**.

The thesis helps readers know where you are going and also **helps you stay on topic**.

**How to change a question into a thesis: answer it.**

A thesis is **NOT** a question; it is the **ANSWER** to a question. (If you do not have a burning question of your own, there are often good questions asked in the introductory essays of source books.)

**Question:** Does *Black Elk Speaks* accurately represent the Indian lifestyle? How?

**Thesis:** *Black Elk Speaks* accurately represents the Indian lifestyle through its attention to cultural detail, its use of Indian words, and its direct quotes from Black Elk.

**Your thesis gives you the topic sentences of your body paragraphs.**

The supporting points or reasons from your thesis become, when expanded, your topic sentences.

Remind the reader of your thesis in the topic sentences of the second and third body paragraphs.

---

**Thesis:** *Black Elk Speaks* accurately represents the Indian lifestyle through its attention to **cultural detail**, its **use of Indian words**, and its direct quotes from Black Elk.

**Topic Sentence 1:** *Black Elk Speaks* includes a vast amount of **cultural detail** about day-to-day Indian life.

**Topic Sentence 2:** The extensive **use of Indian words** and phrases adds to the accurate depiction of Indian life.

**Topic Sentence 3:** The author’s **use of Black Elk’s own words** rather than reports from non-Indians makes the description of Indian ways more accurate.
Thesis templates that might help you get started:

1. Although most readers of X have argued that _______________, closer study [of document X or documents A and B] shows that ________________.
2. [Author, document] uses X and Y to prove Z.
3. Phenomenon X is a result of A, B, and C or A,B, and C caused Phenomenon X.
4. Phenomenon X produced effects A, B, and C.
5. [Someone] failed [or succeeded] in doing X because of (or by means of) A, B, and C.
6. Although [opposing evidence] indicates X, evidence A, B, and C show that [someone/something] in fact did Y [or resulted in Y].
7. Claim X is proved by evidence A,B, and C.

Sample theses:

Because the events in the story emphasize Black Elk’s role as a Sioux Warrior, and do not describe his eventual conversion to Catholicism and membership in the Society of St. Joseph, Black Elk Speaks presents a skewed and simplified view of the complex history of Native Americans. [Template #7]

Thomas Paine’s use of plain language, biblical analogies, and egalitarian rhetoric explains the enormous appeal of Common Sense. [Template #3]

The movie ‘JFK’ inaccurately portrays President Kennedy because of the way it ignores Kennedy’s youth, his relationship with his father, and the findings of the Warren Commission. [Template #5]

Eleanor Roosevelt recreated the role of the First Lady by her active political leadership in the Democratic Party, by lobbying for national legislation, and by fostering women’s leadership in the Democratic Party. [Template #5]

Harry Truman’s decision to drop the bomb on Hiroshima was influenced by the hawks in his cabinet, his concern about Soviet power, and American racism. [Template #3]

Official sources, newspaper accounts, and subsequent histories have presented the USS Monitor solely as a symbol of American technological success, but Melville understood machinery’s ability to dehumanize warfare. [Variation on Template #1]

Though a growing concern about the loss of wilderness obviously contributed to the rise of environmentalism, the movement also was a response to environmental change at the edges of the nation’s cities. [Variation on Template #6]