

Writing a Statement of the Problem

Although the introduction to a short paper may be only one paragraph in length, don't think of that as an ironclad rule. A good rule of thumb is that the introduction should be no longer than 15 percent of your paper. An introduction has two parts (posing the problem and addressing it); each major part has two or more subparts. The introduction ends with a statement of the thesis.

If you think that you've found a thesis, claim, conclusion - or at least a topic - try fitting it into one or more of the following problem statements.

1. Most people believe that _____, but a closer look will show that _____.
Writing in the university most often deals with saying something "new," something "against the grain." Although this sentence does not pose a problem per se, it can help you to arrive at a thesis which will resolve some misunderstanding. To help you (and your readers) figure out why clearing up this understanding is important, you will need one of the other steps.

2. What we know about _____ is that _____; what we don't know is _____.

Not all "new" knowledge is made by showing that someone else has "misunderstood." If you can find a "gap" in what is known, you've also taken the first step to posing a problem. As with #1, however, you need to use one of the other statements to figure out why this gap is worth filling in.

3. If we (do not) understand _____, we will (not) understand _____.

This tip is helpful especially when you are still at the topic stage - you know the subject you are writing about, but you don't yet know your thesis (what you want to say about it) or your organizational structure.

4. I am analyzing/comparing _____ so that I can explain/understand _____.

You have found a problem when you can say both what your paper will do (e.g., analyze) and how you and your readers will benefit from your having done it (the "so that" half). This step can work even if you are still searching for a thesis, as long as you know what you want the paper to do (e.g., analyze, classify, evaluate).

5. So what?

If you can answer some form of this question, you have found a "problem." This tip works especially well when you think you have a thesis.

Adapted from Joseph Williams, The Little Red Schoolhouse, University of Chicago