

Paper Thesis

All research papers must have an overarching *thesis*, or theme, that constitutes the purpose of the paper; a thesis ties the various parts of the paper into a coherent whole. The best way to conceptualize a thesis is a research *question*, a paradox that you will solve in the course of the paper. Generally speaking, you should introduce your overall research topic and your thesis in the introduction. The body of the paper is dedicated to telling the story of your specific topic, while simultaneously analyzing with regard to the thesis. The paper conclusion restates your main research findings, and reevaluates the research topic in light of the findings.

Types of research questions that can be used as themes involve the following:

1. *Why* questions – These seek to answer why something happened, such as: Why did the United States become involved in World War I? Why did Japan's Meiji Restoration take place in 1868? Why did the Great Depression of the 1930s last as long as it did?
2. *What actually happened* questions – This question seeks to establish the true record of facts, based on evidence, when the facts are contested. Examples would include: Whether popularized claims of the Libyan government was committing mass atrocities in the lead up to the 2011 civil war are in fact accurate; or were highly exaggerated. Another would be telling the history of the 1953 overthrow of the Iranian government of Mohammad Mossadegh, noting that previous accounts omit the important role played by the CIA in the overthrow.
3. *Descriptive* history – This involves telling the story of some major event, that has not previously been told; or retelling the story from a new angle. Examples would include the role of LGBT people in the settlement of the American West; the role of subordinated women in the Indian struggle against colonialism during the early twentieth century.