

How to state a thesis about a short story

Before you begin

What you need:

Related text: **“Powder” by Tobias Wolff**

Approximate time this exercise should take you: **20 minutes**

Reminder

What is a thesis statement? A thesis statement should include and explain your response to the story you have chosen to write about. Generally, the term “response” refers to a position that agrees, disagrees, or reacts to some of the major ideas put forth in the story. When we analyse the short story, we usually think in terms of **literary analysis** and identification of themes in the story or analytical observation of how the story works. Your thesis statement will be directly related to the theme you have identified and your reaction to what the author has done with that particular theme. Try to discern comments on human behaviour or values that come through in the story. Don’t think only in terms of a moral or message from the author. Graders normally expect to find a student’s thesis statement in the opening paragraph of the essay.

How long is a thesis statement? A thesis statement usually includes a reaction and/or response to a theme identified in the story. One sentence is usually enough. Keep in mind that you have four hours in all and that you must write a 750-word essay. Try to make a thesis statement that is not too broad, so that you can support and develop it within the time and word-number constraints of the exam.

What does a thesis statement express? You have to do more than make a pronouncement or declare a position on the story. You should clearly explain and state your reaction, setting up the theme you have identified and chosen to write about. A student thesis can also centre on a short story’s organizational pattern, such as techniques used by the author to present a theme. Your thesis statement should clearly identify the focus of your essay, your reaction to the author’s main ideas and theme, or your interpretation of the reading.

Instructions

This exercise will help you **distinguish an acceptable thesis statement from an unacceptable one**. If the statement goes beyond plot summary, identifies a sensible theme, and does not represent a misread (misunderstanding) of the story, it is acceptable.

Read the following sentences and identify them as acceptable or unacceptable thesis statements with an X following the correct answer. There are 10 examples to look at. Consult the **Answer key** once you have completed all the questions.

Exercise 3

1. In this story about a father and his son on a skiing trip, the boy gets to know his father better, respect his ability to do what he says he will do, and even see that his father is a much better driver than he thought he was. He also learns respect; he comes to see his father in a new light.

Acceptable _____ Unacceptable _____

2. “Powder” is a story about two people travelling together to an important family gathering for Christmas, and also how the boy and his father both learn to appreciate and respect each other because of what is happening during the trip.

Acceptable _____ Unacceptable _____

3. Driving in a winter storm, or in any storm for that matter, can be a dangerous experience, especially if you are not equipped for weather conditions and you have no reason to go out there. It is better to stay home and wait for another day.

Acceptable _____ Unacceptable _____

4. Anyone who skis knows that powder skiing is the best skiing ever and the same goes for driving through powder snow, because the thrill makes it all worthwhile. Life is all about taking risks, whether you are on an expert ski hill or at the wheel of a car.

Acceptable _____ Unacceptable _____

5. Both the father and son are willing to take the risk of the trip down the mountain in the storm because they both want to get home, possibly to be a family again, and also because family is especially important during the holiday season.

Acceptable _____ Unacceptable _____

6. People can be foolish and stubborn at times, and this can lead to dangerous risk-taking situations when they are not careful. The father makes them ski longer than they should have, he travels in a dangerous storm, and he does not follow the policeman’s orders to turn back. Who does he think he is? How does he think this will help him earn his son’s respect?

Acceptable _____ Unacceptable _____

7. The events in the story lead the son to resent and even fear his father; he knows that his father wants to impress him but he feels he is going overboard and exaggerating. He tells us he was supposed to say “Right, doctor,” but he refused to say it.
- Acceptable _____ Unacceptable _____
8. Any young adult (he has gone to a bar) would probably appreciate the chance to bond with his or her parents, especially when the parents don’t seem to get along that well. It is important for a teenager to develop a relationship of mutual respect when it comes to how they see their parents and how they interact with them.
- Acceptable _____ Unacceptable _____
9. In “Powder,” we see how sports, especially winter sports, are essential when it comes to parents and children doing things together. This would never happen with family summer activities or other non-sporting activities, obviously because the spirit of competition must be there.
- Acceptable _____ Unacceptable _____
10. After a long day skiing on the mountain, a father and his son stop for a quick coffee and then head home down the snowy roads to meet the boy’s mother at home for Christmas. All’s well that ends well, as they say.
- Acceptable _____ Unacceptable _____

Answer key

1. **Acceptable.** These statements represent more than simple summary of what is happening in the story and tell us the student will examine the theme of father-son relationships as portrayed in “Powder.”
2. **Acceptable.** The student has presented a plan for an essay that will centre not only on the events the characters go through, but also on how these events have affected and will affect their relationship. This thesis makes the jump from summary to analysis and from mere reaction to content to discussion of a theme in the story. This thesis does not simply summarize plot events or react to content, but also analyses the meaning of those events and connects them to a theme.
3. **Unacceptable.** The topic of dangerous conditions might possibly be a valid thesis topic if related properly and correctly to the events of the story. However, in this story, the father has chains on his wheels, he has lots of experience driving in snow conditions, and has promised he will have his son home for important family holiday celebrations. Sometimes it is just more important to try and get somewhere and you need to make it happen whatever it takes.
4. **Unacceptable.** Although the story does explore the thrill of skiing on powder and the dangers of driving in it, there is no evidence that McCourt is saying life is all about risk. Risk and the characters’ willingness to take risks are crucial to the theme, but this statement fails to relate directly to the events of the story or the main character’s evolution.
5. **Acceptable.** The father says: “I’ll tell you what I want. I want us to be together again. Is that what you want?” And the son replies “Yes, sir.” They both seem to agree to try to get home.
6. **Acceptable.** One can surely argue that it is important to practise what you preach, and that when you break the rules you are taking risks; it would be hoped that the student would also realize that the father is taking a calculated risk only, and that he thinks it is important enough in terms of his relationship with his son, but the thesis remains acceptable.
7. **Unacceptable.** This thesis statement covers only the first half of the story. At the end the son is actually telling himself his father is a great driver, that he had not forced him at all, that he trusts his dad, and that he really enjoyed the experience overall.

8. **Acceptable.** The father gets his son involved in the decisions they are taking from the very start, gets him to move the barricade, gets him to go along with what they are doing, and this probably helped them know and respect each other a little more.

9. **Unacceptable.** This is a misread of what is happening. The father is always doing things he is not supposed to do with his son, like sneaking him into bars to see a Thelonious Monk concert. It could have been a ski trip, a mountain hike, or a summer camping trip. Saying this could only happen with winter sports is really not true and the story does not suggest this approach.

10. **Unacceptable.** This is summary only, not even correct summary, and certainly not a thesis statement or theme identification. They do not ski all day, they start on a dangerous drive (dismissing the policeman's orders), and they stop for burgers, not just for coffee. All is not well; there is a lot of tension.

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Before you begin

What you need:

Related text: **“Powder” by Tobias Wolff**

Approximate time this exercise should take you: **20 minutes**

Reminder

Your thesis statement should include and explain your chosen response to the text you have selected from the three offered on the Exit Exam. Your thesis statement should set out a position that agrees or disagrees with some of the major ideas put forth in the story, with a theme in the story, or with what the author tells us about the world, behaviour and universal values.

Generally, the term “response” refers to literary analysis that identifies a theme in the story and how the author has used literary techniques such as narration, characterization, setting, symbolism, or tone to get that theme across to us. You must choose two or three techniques used in the original text that you feel help to explain your thesis.

Instructions

In **Module 9, Exercise 3**, you examined examples of acceptable and unacceptable possible thesis statements or ideas. Now you should be ready to try to write your own thesis statement to form the basis of a response essay. Following the steps in this exercise will help you organize your ideas into a valid thesis statement which will then become the focus of your essay.

This exercise presents a three-step approach that you can use to help you write a valid thesis statement. Compare your responses to those in the **Answer key**.

- **Step 1:** List three main ideas you have identified in the text you are writing about.
- **Step 2:** Focus on one of those ideas and what you want to do with it.
- **Step 3:** Write an actual thesis statement that could become the focus of an essay about the text.

Exercise 4

STEP 1

List up to three main ideas, three major themes, or three unifying concerns/observations you have identified from your reading of “Powder.” These three possible themes/ideas may have come from other exercises in this course or from your most recent reading and reaction to the story.

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

Answer key

STEP 1

Here are some examples of main ideas and themes in the short story “Powder.” You might have identified and listed others, and they will be valid too, as long as they are important and relevant themes raised by Wolff.

- bonding between parents and children/relationships
- life is full of risks (like skiing for example), but these are calculated risks
- why we need or don’t need to always listen to authorities (like parents and police)
- life is an adventure when you least expect it
- how parents manipulate their children to get what they want
- building respect and close relationships
- why people like to take chances when they don’t need to (or when they have to)
- father versus mother in how to raise kids
- the power of nature (winter in particular)
- escaping the ordinary or mundane
- overcoming life’s challenges

STEP 2

Your thesis must reflect your own take, your own reaction to the ideas, themes, and observations you have identified, and your own interpretation of the McCourt story. What you write in response to the theme(s) and observations about life that McCourt makes through his story should be your own reactions expressed in your own way. They will be valid and considered acceptable as long as they make sense, and as long as they reflect themes and concerns in the McCourt story. The list above makes it clear that, as is the case with most stories, there is a good variety of topics to choose from.

STEP 3

Graders usually look for a sensible thesis statement expressed in your first paragraph, an idea that will become a controlling focus in your essay overall. Be sure your thesis statement includes “where you are going” with your essay. This should be something that can be handled in 750 words, some kind of reaction–response to a theme in the Wolff story. Your statement could also include the way you plan to structure your analysis around the author’s effective use of literary techniques. Make sure your thesis is insightful and coherent.

Here are two acceptable thesis statements from **Module 9, Exercise 3** to serve as a reminder.

- In this story about a father and his son on a skiing trip, the boy gets to know his father better, respect his ability to do what he says he will do, and even see that his father is a much better driver than he thought he was. He also learns to respect others and comes to see his father in a new light.
- Both the father and son are willing to take the risk of the trip down the mountain in the storm because they both want to get home, possibly to be a family again, and also because family is especially important during the holiday season.