Writing Exercise: Thesis Statements

Today I want you to focus on writing/drafting a thesis statement for your essay.

This is just a draft and is not set in stone; this exercise is designed to get you thinking about how to structure your thesis and your claims. Until the final draft of your essay, your thesis is really just a (hypo)thesis!

Before Writing a Thesis

- What is a thesis statement?
    - A thesis statement is the central claim, the primary argument, of a paper. It is what you are trying to prove with the paper.
- Before writing a thesis, you need to know what you are planning to argue in your paper.
    - Your thesis statement is the answer to your research question
    - Look at your research and your notes and figure out:
        - What is the shape of the current conversation?
        - What other answers/solutions have already been presented in the literature?
        - What side(s) are you taking in the conversation?
- A thesis statement should:
    - Convey some sort of claim or argument that the rest of the paper is designed to support;
    - Be contestable—i.e., people can argue with your claim—it is not a fact, but an assertion;
    - Generally, include a **plan of development**, a roadmap of how the paper will support the main claim
        - A plan of development lays out the reasons for accepting your thesis/claim, which in turn will be the topics of each section of your essay
    - Be the answer to an implied research question
- A thesis statement should avoid:
    - Being a clear, uncontestable fact
    - Being overtly/highly opinionated
    - Making an announcement of intention, e.g., “My essay will. . .”; “Such and such is the subject of this paper”; etc.
    - Making a broad, open-ended statement that cannot be support

Writing a Thesis Statement

While there are tons of ways to write a good thesis statement, a thesis generally contains three elements: a **qualification**, a **plan of development** demonstrating why your thesis is valid, and a **claim** presenting the exact position you are presenting.

1. Write out your **claim**—the position you are taking in your essay
    a. If you do not yet have a position, making a cluster or a map with your topic in the center is a good way to help yourself find a position.
    b. Another good way is to begin a free write, "I'm supposed to write an essay about_____. . ." and see where it takes you.
    c. Example: Background check legislation for guns reduces violent crime
2. Write a **qualification** to your claim—are there exceptions to your claim?
    a. Is your claim always accurate? Are there exceptions?
    b. Are there good reasons why your position may have a downside?
    c. How can you make your position have a reality check?
        i. To make absolute statements usually causes your essay's thesis to seem foolishly simplistic.
    d. What general reasons why your position may have problems can you admit up front?
    e. Tip: begin your qualification with a word like "although" or "It is accurate that. . ." Don't worry if it's not a complete sentence.
    f. Example: Although background checks will not keep people from acquiring guns illegally. . .
3. Write a **plan of development** for your claim—what are the major reasons to accept your claim?
    a. In general, what reasons led you to believe your position to be correct in spite of your qualification?
    b. What is the overall good to be gained by agreeing with your position?
    c. Develop two-four good reasons to include
    d. Example: background checks reduce access to guns, prevent criminals from getting guns legally, and help reduce suicide rates.
4. Write your thesis statement by combining these elements together into a sentence (or two)!
    a. *Example: Although they will not keep people from acquiring guns illegally, background check legislation for guns reduces violent crime, because they reduce access to guns, prevent criminals from getting guns legally, and help reduce suicide rates.*

Note: This is just an exercise to think about how to structure and write a thesis. Not every thesis will necessarily include all of these steps (although most will), nor should they always follow this exact same order. This is meant merely as a possible and helpful model, not as a required template.