Thesis Definition

The thesis is one of the most important concepts in college expository writing. A thesis sentence focuses your ideas for the paper; it's your argument or insight or viewpoint crystallized into a sentence or two that gives the reader your main idea. It's not only useful for the reading audience to understand the purpose of the essay, it's also useful for you as a writer, as it indicates the type of support that will follow in the paper and it may indicate a logical structure or order for that support. So...you need to have a good grasp of the concept of thesis in order to proceed.

The thesis identifies two basics:

1. what your ideas are about, and
2. what your ideas are.

There are two parts to a thesis sentence that reflect these basics.

1. The topic in the thesis tells what you are writing about.
2. The angle in the thesis tells what your ideas are about the topic.

For example:

* **All successful college students have certain basic characteristics**. [The main topic is about college students, while the idea or angle about the topic is that successful students share certain characteristics. The thesis indicates the type of support needed--discussion of those characteristics that contribute to college success.]
* **For most adult students returning to college, the problems that they face along the way are outweighed by their achievements**. [The main topic is about adult college students, while the idea or angle about the topic is that problems are outweighed by achievements. The thesis indicates the type of support needed and the order of that support--an explanation of the problems first and then an explanation of achievements second.]
* **Adult students returning to college make up a higher percentage of entering students than they did twenty years ago because of a number of statistical, economic, and social reasons**. [The main topic is about adult students returning to college, while the idea or angle about the topic is that there are reasons for the higher percentage of adults returning to college. The thesis indicates the type of support needed and the order of that support--an explanation of the statistical reasons first, economic reasons second, and social reasons third.]

Do you understand the basic topic and angle concept? If so, then there are a few more things to consider about the thesis. It's important to investigate additional thesis characteristics at this point to make sure that you'll be creating working thesis sentences that actually are workable and appropriate for college essays. So in addition to knowing what a thesis is, you need to know what a thesis is not.

A thesis sentence's angle should NOT be:

* Too broad. For example, the following thesis really doesn't pinpoint a specific insight about the topic: Adult students returning to college have a hard time. In what ways do adult students have a hard time? You'd need to identify a more specific insight in this angle.
* Too narrow a statement of fact. For example, the following thesis really cannot be developed into a full essay because the angle doesn't contain the writer's own thoughts or insights about the subject: Adult students returning to college read an average of 7.5 books per term. A reader may respond by saying, "So what?" A narrow statement of fact does not contain your own personal analysis, argument, or interpretation of the topic, that all-important angle which a thesis must have.
* An announcement. For example, the following really is not a thesis at all because it lacks an angle that gives the writer's own insight into the topic: My topic is the adult student returning to college. Again, "So what?" What's the reader's idea here?

Once you create a working thesis, you should assess it to make sure that it fulfills thesis characteristics. Make sure it has a clear topic (indication of what the thesis is about) and angle (what your own ideas are about the topic). Make sure that the angle is not too broad, too narrow, a statement of fact, or an announcement. Work with the angle to make it indicate the order of your support, if you choose to do that for yourself or for your reading audience. And realize that the thesis is a working thesis until you finalize the essay (it's o.k. to revise the thesis as you go along just as long as you retain important thesis characteristics.)