

## How to state a thesis about a short story

### Before you begin

#### What you need:

Related text: **“Cranes Fly South” by Edward McCourt**

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 a 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 1

1. “Cranes Fly South” is all about old people and their desire to retire in Florida and go there to avoid the hard Canadian winter months. In fact, for obvious reasons, everyone in the family wishes they could go south like the birds, and that’s why they are called snowbirds.

Acceptable \_\_\_\_\_ Unacceptable \_\_\_\_\_

2. In the story, an old man had the chance to see a rare whooping crane with the help of his grandson, who saw the bird first; this seems to be important for the old man but the experience proves to be a little too much for him in the end. His death leaves his grandson, Lee, very confused.

Acceptable \_\_\_\_\_ Unacceptable \_\_\_\_\_

3. The boy does not really understand or even like his grandfather that much; he does not care that he is putting his life on the line by having him make the trip out to see the crane in the woods. He is really most concerned with impressing his grandfather, to get on his good side. He wants to impress his grandfather and his parents too.

Acceptable \_\_\_\_\_ Unacceptable \_\_\_\_\_

4. The story is all about coming of age and coping with death. For the boy, he is learning about life, the consequences of his decisions, and what really matters most for his grandfather. For the old man, he knows his time is limited, but he will not let this prevent him from doing something he sees as important to him, despite the risks he knows might be involved. He just wants to see the whooping crane and that is all.

Acceptable \_\_\_\_\_ Unacceptable \_\_\_\_\_

5. In “Cranes Fly South,” McCourt has used setting and character development effectively to explain the harsh family relationships that exist between members of the same family (covering three generations) in a rural farm-country setting where travel can be difficult and living conditions hard to endure.

Acceptable \_\_\_\_\_ Unacceptable \_\_\_\_\_

6. The end of the story brings the whole thing together because the grandfather has made his escape; he has made it south to Texas or Florida, and a better climate. He has “gone south” as Lee says. This is what he has always wanted most, to get away, to escape from his poor farm-life environment. This story is actually all about escape, and now Lee knows that he can escape too, just like the old man.

Acceptable\_\_\_\_\_ Unacceptable\_\_\_\_\_

7. “Cranes Fly South” reminds us all that the environment is very fragile and, for various reasons, some species are even threatened with extinction. This makes it all the more impressive when we see something like a wild whooping crane. It is the same for bald eagles for example; there are hardly any left nowadays.

Acceptable\_\_\_\_\_ Unacceptable\_\_\_\_\_

8. Lee’s mother and father find themselves stuck with taking care of the old man, and they will not be sad the grandfather has passed on, especially because it has not been easy taking care of him for so many years. This is a big problem with old people and with who will take care of them nowadays. The same problem exists in our Quebec hospitals where there is no room for elders.

Acceptable\_\_\_\_\_ Unacceptable\_\_\_\_\_

9. “Cranes Fly South” introduces the theme of euthanasia (mercy killing of the old) through a son and daughter and grandson willing to help the old man to pass on when his time has clearly come.

Acceptable\_\_\_\_\_ Unacceptable\_\_\_\_\_

10. The McCourt story is all about the idea that it is important to live life to the fullest, no matter how old you are, that the past is always important, especially for the elderly, and that the young can learn a lot from older relatives about not being afraid of death and enjoying life while you can. We should live our lives as if every day is our last day on earth, as they say in a popular Country and Western song on the radio.

Acceptable\_\_\_\_\_ Unacceptable\_\_\_\_\_

# Answer key

1. **Unacceptable.** The story is indeed about an old man who lives in a country (rural) environment, and there is a brief mention of going to Texas where the cranes fly south in the winter, but no one takes the grandfather seriously. An essay built only around the thesis of people going south for the winter would be seen as inappropriate and a misread of the story. The grandfather says something about going south, but there is no mention of the boy, or his parents, wanting to do the same.
2. **Unacceptable.** A thesis statement must do more than summarize plot. This thesis statement only identifies major events happening in the story, and does not take a position or include reaction to a theme identified as emerging from the event mentioned. This is plot summary and not literary analysis of aspects of style or content in the story. At the end Lee seems to understand what just happened; he is sad but not confused.
3. **Unacceptable.** This is a misread and incorrect interpretation of events and character motivation in the story. There is no evidence that the boy does not respect his grandfather; in fact, at first he says he won't let him go because he knows his mother will be upset. Lee gives in only because he loves his grandfather; he knows how important it is for him, and he plans to be as careful as possible.
4. **Acceptable.** This thesis statement clearly identifies major themes in the story, namely coming of age and coping with death in old age. Either one could be the central focus and thesis of an interesting essay about the story, one that goes beyond plot summary, as well as one that develops from a major theme in the story.
5. **Acceptable.** An essay built around this thesis statement cannot help but present some clear literary analysis and reactions to events portrayed by McCourt. The essay will be centred around two literary techniques (the student might have even chosen other techniques) used by McCourt, and that is clearly acceptable.
6. **Unacceptable.** An essay built on this thesis statement would be unacceptable because it misreads the ending of the story. There is no evidence the grandfather hates his life on the farm. When Lee says the old man has "gone south," he is clearly referring to another world (he is dead). Lee also probably realizes his grandfather accepted his own death at the end and the consequences of his trip to see the crane.

7. **Acceptable.** The beauty of the natural world remains something amazing for both Lee and his grandfather, and this does lead us to think a little of why cranes are so scarce. “I ain’t seen a whooper for forty years” says the old man, and changes in the environment (hunting, pollution?) have probably had something to do with this. While not the most obvious theme in the story, an essay centred on this theme could work.
  
8. **Unacceptable.** The theme of who will take care of the elderly in these modern times is an important issue, but not one raised through this story. There is no evidence Lee’s parents have mistreated the grandfather or are happy he is gone at the end. The opposite is true for all three people who survive the old man’s death.
  
9. **Unacceptable.** Euthanasia (mercy killing) is not a theme in this story. At the end, no one is happy about the grandfather’s death or willingly helps the grandfather die. An essay centred on this topic would be considered off-topic and a misread of the story.
  
10. **Acceptable.** There are three acceptable thesis statements in the first sentence, each of which could be the centre of a good essay about the story. The second sentence repeats (for emphasis) the most obvious idea of the number one thesis.

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### Before you begin

#### What you need:

Related text: **“Cranes Fly South” by Edward McCourt**

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 in 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 uses 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 1**, 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 2

## STEP 1

List up to three main ideas, three major themes, or three unifying concerns/observations you have identified from your reading of “Cranes Fly South.” These three possible themes/ideas may have come from other exercises in this course.

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2. \_\_\_\_\_  
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3. \_\_\_\_\_  
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## STEP 2

Theoretically, your essay could centre on one of the three themes or ideas identified in Step 1, above. Consider each idea in turn. What is your reaction to the idea? How does the story effectively bring forth the theme you have identified? Do you agree or disagree with what McCourt is implying about people and relationships through his story? What are the stylistic highlights (literary techniques) that stand out in your mind in terms of characterization, use of setting, realistic dialogue, detailed description, or narrative structure? What do you feel about the way he writes in general? What does he tell you about the world, about life in general, about human behaviour and values?

Remember, in your essay, you will need to centre on one unifying theme or idea that will form the basis of a clear thesis statement. A good story offers different possibilities. You only need to choose one of them. **In the space below, write your reaction or response to one of the main ideas you identified in Step 1, keeping in mind your answers to some of the “guidance” questions above.**

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### STEP 3

Now you must make a choice from your three possible ideas and decide on one unifying thesis statement written in one or two sentences that will become the focus of your essay. Choose one theme or main idea to write about that you see in McCourt's story. Remember, your thesis statement should make it clear to readers the theme you are going to write about and it should include your primary observations about this theme. You may use the first-person "I" in your thesis statement if you wish (and even on occasion in your essay) as long as you do not exaggerate the use of "I" statements in your final essay.

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# Answer key

## STEP 1

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

- the life cycle
- coping with death, for both the young and the old
- the importance of recapturing the past
- relationships between different generations
- the harshness and realities of rural life
- living life to the fullest when and while you can and not being afraid to chase your dreams
- environment and the disappearance of some species
- you are never too old to dream
- escaping the dreariness of dull, everyday life
- the beauties of the natural world
- rare animals seen in the wild are a unique, inspiring sight

## 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

Look for a sensible thesis statement in your first paragraph and an idea that will become a controlling focus in your essay. Be sure your thesis statement includes “where you are going” with your essay—some kind of reaction-response to a theme in the McCourt story that can be handled in 750 words. This statement could also include how you will structure your analysis around the author’s effective use of literary techniques. If your thesis choice is particularly insightful and coherent, this will impress your graders all the more so.

Below are two acceptable thesis statements from **Module 9, Exercise 1** to serve as a reminder.

- “Cranes Fly South” is all about coming of age and coping with death. For the boy, he is learning about life, the consequences of his decisions, and what really matters most for his grandfather. For the old man, he knows his time is limited; however, he will not let this prevent him from doing something he sees as important to him, despite the risks that might be involved in going to see the crane in the first place.
- In “Cranes Fly South,” McCourt uses detailed description of setting and realistic, effective character development to present his views on the conflicting family relationships between members of the same family, covering three generations. They all live in a rural farm-country setting, where travel can be difficult and living conditions hard to endure.