Developing Arguments and Thesis Statements

A thesis statement sets up an argument that you will then develop in a paper or speech. What makes a thesis more than just a general topic?

Topics: “Fancy topics” (what might pass for a thesis in high school):
World War II World War II affected millions of people.
American Farming American farmers receive many subsidies.

A THESIS STATEMENT SHOULD BE

- focused (specific and narrow enough for the scope of the assignment)
- arguable (open to debate)
- researchable (able to be verified or supported by evidence)

Thesis statements:
THESIS #1: World War II caused great economic devastation because the war displaced millions of refugees to countries whose post-war economies could not afford to support new citizens.

THESIS #2: Although the American family farmer is struggling, government subsidies should be cut, not increased, because subsidies are crippling the world market on which American farmers must sell their goods.

A THESIS STATEMENT “FORMULA”:

[SHARED ASSUMPTION], ASSERTION [because] MAIN REASON($)

1. Shared assumption: Something you and your audience/readers agree on. Often this comes from the question or assignment itself; it may be implied, not explicit.
2. Assertion: The argument or claim you will explore and “prove” in your essay.
3. Main reason(s): One or more specific pieces of evidence you will develop in your essay as support for your argument; this may appear in a “because” clause in the thesis statement.
4. Repeated term: The connection between your assertion and claim is often manifested by a repeated term in the subject of both clauses.

How Thesis #2 fits the thesis formula:
Government subsidies should be cut (ASSERTION/CLAIM)
because subsidies are crippling the world market... (REASON) [Claim and reason linked by repeated term, “subsidies”]

Shared Assumptions: The American family farmer is struggling; (unstated) subsidies help farmers
Claim: Subsidies should be cut.
Reason: Subsidies are crippling the market on which American farmers must sell their goods.
Thesis Formula Exercises

1. Explain how this thesis statement meets the four criteria of the thesis formula:

   After-school jobs are bad for teenagers because they take away study time.

   After-school jobs are bad for teenagers
   because
   they [after-school jobs] take away study time.

   1. The assertion is that "after-school jobs are bad for teenagers." (The term "bad" is a bit vague and would probably have to be more specific in a revised thesis.)
   2. The reason is "because they take away study time."
   3. The unstated assumption is that having less study time is bad for teenagers; this is the crux of the argument.
   4. There is a shared term: "After-school jobs are bad for teenagers because they (after-school jobs) take away study time."

2. Complete this thesis statement to meet the four criteria:

   A liberal arts degree is better than a business degree for success in life
   because
   a liberal arts degree __________________________________________________________

   Shared assumption= ________________________________________________________

3. Now write your own thesis in the formula:

   ____________________________________________ (Repeated term)
   because
   ____________________________________________ (Repeated term)

   Shared assumption= ________________________________________________________

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