

Formulating a Thesis

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You need a good thesis statement for your essay but are having trouble getting started. You may have heard that your thesis needs to be specific and arguable, but still wonder what this really means.

Let's look at some examples. Imagine you're writing about John Hughes's film *Sixteen Candles* (1984). You take a first pass at writing a thesis: *Sixteen Candles* is a romantic comedy about high school cliques.

Is this a strong thesis statement? Not yet, but it's a good start. You've focused on a topic—high school cliques—which is a smart move because you've settled on one of many possible angles. But the claim is weak because it's not yet arguable. Intelligent people would generally agree with this statement—so there's no real “news” for your reader. You want your thesis to say something surprising and debatable. If your thesis doesn't go beyond summarizing your source, it's not arguable.

The key words in the thesis statement are “romantic comedy” and “high school cliques.” One way to sharpen the claim is to *start asking questions*.

For example, how does the film represent high school cliques in a surprising or complex way? How does the film reinforce stereotypes about high school groups and how does it undermine them? Or why does the film challenge our expectations about romantic comedies by focusing on high school cliques? If you can answer one of those questions (or others of your own), you'll have a strong thesis.



Tip : Asking “how” or “why” questions will help you refine your thesis, making it more arguable and interesting to your readers.

Take 2. You revise the thesis: *Sixteen Candles* is a romantic comedy criticizing the divisiveness created by high school cliques. Is it strong now?

You're getting closer. You're starting to take a stance by arguing that the film identifies “divisiveness” as a problem and *criticizes* it, but your readers will want to know how this plays out and why it's important. Right now, the thesis still sounds bland – not risky enough

to be genuinely contentious.

Tip: Keep raising questions that test your ideas. And ask yourself the “so what” question. Why is your thesis interesting or important?

Take 3. Let's try again. How about this version? Although the film *Sixteen Candles* appears to reinforce stereotypes about high school cliques, it undermines them in important ways, questioning its viewers' assumptions about what's normal.

Bingo! This thesis statement is pretty strong. It challenges an obvious interpretation of the movie (that it just reinforces stereotypes), offering a new and more complex reading in its place. We also have a sense of why this argument is important. The film's larger goal, we learn, is to question what we think we understand about normalcy.

What's a Strong Thesis?



As we've just seen, a strong thesis statement crystallizes your paper's argument and, most importantly, *argues a debatable point*.

This means two things. It goes beyond merely summarizing or describing to stake out an interpretation or position that's not obvious, and others could challenge for good reasons. It's also arguable in the literal sense that it can be *argued*, or supported through a thoughtful analysis of your sources. If your argument lacks evidence, readers will think your thesis statement is an opinion or belief as opposed to an argument.

Exercises for Drafting an Arguable Thesis

A good thesis will be *focused* on your object of study (as opposed to making a big claim about the world) and will introduce the *key words* guiding your analysis.

To get started, you might experiment with some of these "mad libs." They're thinking exercises that will help propel you toward an arguable thesis.

By examining _____ [topic/approach], we can see _____ [thesis—the claim that's surprising], which is important because _____.

Example:

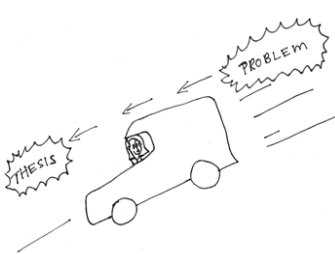
"By examining *Sixteen Candles* through the lens of Georg Simmel's writings on fashion, we can see that the protagonist's interest in fashion as an expression of her conflicted desire to be seen as both unique and accepted by the group. This is important because the film offers its viewers a glimpse into the ambivalent yearnings of middle class youth in the 1980s.

Although readers might assume _____ [the commonplace idea you're challenging], I argue that _____ [your surprising claim].

Example:

Although viewers might assume the romantic comedy *Sixteen Candles* is merely entertaining, I believe its message is political. The film uses the romance between Samantha, a middle-class sophomore, and Jake, an affluent senior, to reinforce the fantasy that anyone can become wealthy and successful with enough cunning and persistence.

Still Having Trouble? Let's Back Up...



It helps to understand why readers value the arguable thesis. What larger purpose does it serve? Your readers will bring a set of expectations to your essay. The better you can anticipate the expectations of your readers, the better you'll be able to persuade them to entertain seeing things your way.

Academic readers (and readers more generally) read to learn something new. They want to see the writer challenge commonplaces—either everyday assumptions about your

object of study or truisms in the scholarly literature. In other words, academic readers want to be surprised so that their thinking shifts or at least becomes more complex by the time they finish reading your essay. Good essays problematize what we think we know and offer an alternative explanation in its place. They leave their reader with a fresh perspective on a problem.

We all bring important past experiences and beliefs to our interpretations of texts, objects, and problems. You can harness these observational powers to engage critically with what you are studying. The key is to be alert to what strikes you as strange, problematic, paradoxical, or puzzling about your object of study. If you can articulate this and a claim in response, you're well on your way to formulating an arguable thesis in your introduction.

How do I set up a "problem" and an arguable thesis in response?



All good writing has a purpose or motive for existing. Your thesis is your surprising response to this problem or motive. This is why it seldom makes sense to start a writing project by articulating the thesis. The first step is to articulate the question or problem your paper addresses.

Here are some possible ways to introduce a conceptual problem in your paper's introduction.

1. Challenge a commonplace interpretation (or your own first impressions).



How are readers likely to interpret this source or issue? What might intelligent readers think at first glance? (Or, if you've been given secondary sources or have been asked to conduct research to locate secondary sources, what do other writers or scholars assume is true or important about your primary source or issue?)

What does this commonplace interpretation leave out, overlook, or under-emphasize?

2. Help your reader see the complexity of your topic.



Identify and describe for your reader a paradox, puzzle, or contradiction in your primary source(s).

What larger questions does this paradox or contradiction raise for you and your readers?



3. If your assignment asks you to do research, piggyback off another scholar's research.

Summarize for your reader another scholar's argument about your topic, primary source, or case study and tell your reader why this claim is interesting.

Now explain how you will extend this scholar's argument to explore an issue or case study that the scholar doesn't address fully.



4. If your assignment asks you to do research, identify a gap in another scholar's or a group of scholars' research.

Summarize for your reader another scholar's argument about your topic, primary source, or case study and tell your reader why this claim is interesting. Or, summarize how scholars in the field tend to approach your topic.

Next, explain what important aspect this scholarly representation misses or distorts. Introduce your particular approach to your topic and its value.



5. If your assignment asks you to do research, bring in a new lens for investigating your case study or problem.

Summarize for your reader how a scholar or group of scholars has approached your topic.

Introduce a theoretical source (possibly from another discipline) and explain how it helps you address this issue from a new and productive angle.



Tip: your introductory paragraph will probably look like this.

Testing Your Thesis

You can test your thesis statement's arguability by asking the following questions:

Does my thesis only or mostly summarize my source?

If so, try some of the exercises above to articulate your paper's conceptual problem or question.

Is my thesis arguable –can it be supported by evidence in my source, and is it surprising and contentious?

If not, return to your sources and practice the exercises above.

Is my thesis about my primary source or case study, or is it about the world?

If it's about the world, revise it so that it focuses on your primary source or case study. Remember you need solid evidence to support your thesis.