[**Formulating a Thesis**](http://writingcommons.org/process/focus/formulating-a-thesis)

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***](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/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 descriptive and not yet argumentative.

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.

Screen Shot 2013-02-09 at 2.32.39 PM**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. Is it strong now?

*Sixteen Candles* is a romantic comedy criticizing the divisiveness created by high school cliques.

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.

Screen Shot 2013-02-09 at 2.32.39 PM**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 is 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, it’s *arguable*.

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.

**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.

I**s 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.