

Developing Thesis Statements

CLAIMS

Strong Claims (thesis statements) tend to....

- **Make an argument** about how a particular thing (text, video, movie, speech, etc.) works. Try to avoid simple observations or statements that everyone would agree with. Sometimes it's helpful for your first draft of a thesis to simply start with: "In this essay, I argue...."
- **Name important materials** you're working with:
 - A key theory from a particular author;
 - Central text(s) you analyze;
 - Other central materials (interviews, media, research studies, scholarship, stories, anecdotes, etc.)
- **Include some tension.** In other words, you don't want to argue something everyone already agrees with! Some ways to use tension include:
 - Although many people believe X, through studying Y, I have found M...
 - Despite the current research on Y, in my own study, I argue X...
 - Many critical race theorists have defined and explored concept Y; by exploring this comedienne's persona, I aim to extend Y by adding X.
 - My work supports research into X by adding an investigation into area Y. Although I have similar findings as John X, by looking at area Y, I further expand the site of investigation.
- Offer a **very specific explanation of what you've found.** Strong essays tend to develop out of a question, and claims/theses function as an answer to that question. When working with texts, "findings" often means describing how a particular feature of a text or a particular idea works—and why that feature/idea is important. When describing, try to use specific descriptions, adjectives, and words that explain what's significant.
- In claims/theses, findings and arguments tend to be small and nuanced. Don't feel like you need to make a completely new discovery or revelation in your claim! Rather, try to be focused and specific about what you have found through the work you do in your essay.

SOME TEMPLATES

In "title," Author A explores [important larger concept] by using [aspects of the texts/evidence] in order to suggest [argument about larger concept].

In [research area/topic], Authors A, B and C all draw on [term/concept/theory] in order to [X]. Synthesizing their definitions of this [term/concept/theory], I have found [M]. OR, However, [term/concept/theory] is not clearly defined, which leads to problem [Y].

Looking at [research area/topic], we can use Author A's [theory/idea] to help us better understand [concept] in a [specific slightly new way]. Specifically, using [theory/idea] allow us to see [Z] about [research area/topic].

SOME EXAMPLE CLAIMS

In the news lately, there has been a lot of disparaging of hashtag culture and hashtags as a form of “arm chair” activism, or lazy activism. However, by looking at some of the examples of hashtag protests from Bonilla and Rosa’s “#Ferguson” through the lens of John Del Gandio’s “Activists, Bodies and Political Arguments,” I have found that digital protests that use hashtags are effective because they bring greater awareness to a wider audience of the issue and they also function as, what Del Gandio calls, an important protest signifier.

“In my research, I sought to understand what meanings today’s working cowboy associates with being an authentic cowboy by interviewing my father and drawing on past experiences in my rural hometown. [...] **In my investigation, I found urbanization has caused the cowboy to adopt three symbols of authenticity—land and agriculture, origins, and a code of ethics—as a means to preserve his identity in the face of assimilation.** This essay scrutinizes each of these symbols to understand exactly what they entail, how the contemporary working cowboy uses them as preservation mechanisms, and the possible negative implications they may hold for him. Ultimately, these findings will add to our understanding of the nature of authenticity claims in the grander scheme of waning subcultures” (141).¹

CLAIMS WORKSHOP

PRACTICE

As a class or in a small group, discuss the above claims. What are their strengths and weaknesses? Can you identify the above parts of strong claims in them? How could they be better?

PART 1: LOCATING YOUR “FINDINGS”

In order to locate your “findings” or make your claim more detailed, *after* you have written your entire essay, do the following:

1. Read through your essay & locate what you say about your evidence. Highlight it.
2. Hopefully, as you encounter new evidence, you find different and interesting things to say about how the evidence works. Notice how the evidence works across your body paragraphs.
3. Try to capture what you’ve highlighted in your thesis. Do you say one thing or three or four? Do your findings paint a coherent picture or did you discover tensions & conflicts?

PART 2: PEER REVIEW CLAIMS

Switch papers with a partner or small group, and then:

1. Try to identify each of the above components of a strong claim (the words in red) in your peer’s essay. As you identify them, write down/label them.
2. Notice & make notes on your partner’s paper about: what their claim/thesis is not doing from the above list, what needs a bit more explanation and detail, and what you don’t easily understand. Try to articulate why.
3. Discuss what you wrote down with your partner. Try to be as specific as possible about what information is missing or could be more clearly explained. Conversation & Q&A about the writer’s paper will lead to stronger claims; so, ask lots of specific questions about your peer’s essay and argument that will get them thinking and talking!

¹ Rieck, Virginia. “Lessons of My Father: The Double-Edged Symbols of Cowboy Authenticity.” *The Norton Pocket Book of Writing by Students*. Ed. Melissa A. Goldthwaite. W.W. Norton & Company, 2010. 140-50.