

WEEK 2 – COMPOSING A THESIS

CHECK OUT THESE THESIS STATEMENTS. WHAT ARE THEIR WEAKNESSES?

- 1) “The Ford Explorer TV commercial ‘Tough Love’ depicts the vehicle easily traversing various sweeping yet rugged landscapes.”

This is a summary; it’s neither analytical nor argumentative.

- 2) “The Ford Explorer TV commercial ‘Tough Love’ is an example of the wilderness master plot.”

This is too general; it hints at an argument—somebody could, perhaps, argue that the commercial is not an example of the wilderness master plot—but it needs to be fleshed out to be more specific and nuanced.

A STRONG THESIS SHOULD BE:

- ✓ **SPECIFIC:** If your thesis can be transposed to a multitude of texts, your thesis is too broad. A strong thesis will provide a specific claim about the texts that has a narrow focus. Generally, the more specific the better.
- ✓ **DEBATABLE:** A strong thesis will articulate a debatable claim. If there are no plausible counterarguments to your argument, then you are probably making an observation about something that is manifest in the text. Debatable claims have some kind of larger significance. What is at stake in your argument? Why are you taking the time to make *this* argument? Why should your reader care about your argument? Put bluntly, so what?

A BETTER THESIS:

“The Ford Explorer TV commercial ‘Tough Love,’ with its inspiring shots of beautiful yet foreboding landscapes, wants its viewers to associate the SUV with rugged individualism and with escape from the confines of city life. By deploying these associations to entice viewers to buy this large four-wheel-drive vehicle, the commercial ultimately perpetuates the wilderness master plot and the frontier mentality that undergirds it.”

THE MAGIC THESIS STATEMENT

The Magic Thesis Statement: “By looking at _____, we can see _____, which is important because _____.”

The MTS is not the most succinct or stylish way to phrase your thesis, but it can be a useful tool to make a first draft of your thesis statement.

OTHER TRICKS AND TIPS

- ✓ **THESIS STATEMENT, NOT SENTENCE:** Remember that a thesis statement need not be a single sentence. If the sentence is getting too bloated by trying to cram in so much detail, consider splitting it across multiple sentences (see example above).

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- ✓ **REWRITE:** Be flexible: if you find yourself moving toward a different conclusion than the one you first came up with, go ahead and alter your thesis! Think of the first draft as the (hypo)thesis.
- ✓ **ALTHOUGH OR BUT:** “Although” can be a useful rhetorical structure to think through if you want to add nuance to your thesis statement. (e.g., “Although this music video subverts the masculine history of the wilderness master plot, it ultimately still endorses the master plot by depicting her retreat from the city to ‘untouched’ nature as both ruggedly individualistic and spiritually invigorating.”)

CRITICAL VERB WORD BANK

Sometimes, student thesis statements are actually summaries, not arguments. To determine whether you’re summarizing or writing an argument, your verb use is crucial. You might be using one of the following verbs, for instance:

Utilizes	Represents
Creates	Demonstrates
Reveals	Expresses
Establishes	Shows
Makes	Conveys
Highlights	Uses
Juxtaposes	

Neutral verbs like this, in a thesis statement, often mean you're explaining something, not making an argument **about** something. As such, they're good for body paragraphs, but not thesis statements. For thesis statements, consider "charged" verbs: they prevent your writing from being noncommittal or summative. Here are some positively charged verbs to consider:

endorses	reinforces
celebrates	promotes
champions	advocates

Here are some negatively charged verbs to consider:

undermines	negates
limits	subverts
dissuades	complicates

N.B. While it is possible to make an argumentative claim with a neutral verb like “argues,” it will often be more concise to use a charged verb instead (e.g., “expresses a critique of” vs. “criticizes” or “highlights the positive aspects of” vs. “promotes”).