Putting Thesis Statements to the Test: A Flowchart

DEFINE YOUR AUDIENCE. Are you pitching your paper to fellow sociology majors? Aspiring small business owners? Or, perhaps, a general audience focused on social issues of common concern? Answering these questions will help you to….

SET THE STAKES. Should the audience care about your paper because it overturns a commonly held assumption in your field? Because it breaks new ground by presenting original research? Because it uncovers a hidden complexity or question that would be of interest to specialists or a general audience? Because it offers a fresh perspective on a familiar debate or longstanding problem?

FIND THE PROOF. When it comes to the audience you’ve chosen (see “Define Your Audience,” above left) what counts as evidence? Given these parameters, how will you support your argument and demonstrate its significance in a concrete way? Bear in mind that the strongest writers present readers with both obvious and non-obvious examples. Aim to evoke the “ah-ha!” reaction at least once in your paper.

MAKE ROOM FOR ANALYSIS. Which examples in your paper speak for themselves? And which ones will require patient, thorough explanation to become fully meaningful? Move through the former examples quickly and spend lots of time on the latter.

ANTICIPATE OBJECTIONS and weave your rebuttals throughout the essay. Rather than assuming there is only one counterargument to address, think of the many different questions or objections that readers might raise at different moments in your paper.

This handout will be useful if you’re not sure whether your thesis makes sense, or if you’re concerned that your thesis may not be complex enough to sustain a paper of X pages.
TRY IT NOW

Who are you speaking to in this paper?

What will this audience gain by reading your paper?

Where will you find the evidence?

When will you surprise readers by presenting a creative or offbeat example?

Which moments in the essay will display your skills as a close, careful reader – one who perceives layers of meaning within the evidence?

How will you address the multiple objections that readers could raise to your argument, evidence, and analysis?