You may have heard that your thesis needs to be specific and arguable, but what does that mean?

Is the following thesis, for example, arguable?

_Sixteen Candles is a romantic comedy about high school cliques._

No, that’s not very arguable, but it’s a good start. While it’s narrow in focus—which is good—the claim is weak because intelligent people would generally agree with that statement. There’s no real “news” for the reader, so it’s not yet arguable.

One way to sharpen the claim and make it more arguable 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? If you can answer one of those questions (or other “how” and “why” questions of your own), you’ll have a strong thesis.

Take 2. We expand our original thesis by answering the question, “How is the film about high school cliques?”

This is what we end up with:

_Sixteen Candles is a romantic comedy criticizing the divisiveness created by high school cliques._

Is it strong now? Well, we’re definitely getting closer. We’re starting to take a stance by arguing that the film identifies “divisiveness” as a problem and criticizes it, but our 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 arguable.

Take 3. Let’s try again. We keep raising questions that test our ideas and ask ourselves the “so what” question. We think about why our claim is interesting or important. All of that thinking leads us to this new version of our thesis:

_Although the film Sixteen Candles appears to reinforce stereotypes about high school cliques, it actually undermines them in important ways, questioning its viewers’ assumptions about what is 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. That, my friend, is what an “arguable” thesis looks like.