Unraveling the Mystery of the "Controversial Thesis"

Have you ever brought a paper into the Writing Center only to hear this enigma—"your thesis isn't controversial enough?" Well, Writing Fellows aren't here to puzzle you; we just forget to explain our jargon sometimes. This handout will lift the shroud of mystery from the controversial thesis and clarify what a controversial thesis is and how to write one!

What is a controversial thesis?

A controversial thesis is a cogent argument that considers questions that have not already been answered.

For example, "The characters in The Sopranos are very complex" is not a controversial thesis. It is not a controversial thesis because it presents a preexisting phenomenon, of which many people (probably including your professor) are aware. More importantly, while this thesis statement is true, it is not arguable.

A good litmus test to see if your thesis is arguable is to ask yourself: does my reader know why I'm making this point? Since the reader is left wondering "so what?" by the aforementioned thesis, it is not controversial.

On the other hand, "Some say that The Sopranos presents caricatures of Italian Americans. However, the characters in the series are very complex!" is a controversial thesis. The reader knows why the author is putting forth this argument; the author wants to enter into a debate about the characters on The Sopranos, instead of just presenting them.

How do I write a controversial thesis?

It still might seem challenging to take an original stance in a complicated and active debate, but never fear—here are some tips for writing a controversial thesis:

1. Consider a counter-argument
   Comparing or contrasting your interpretation to a standard view or even to a view that you used to hold can create a counter-argument.

2. Define your terms and assumptions
   By providing your reasons for agreeing or disagreeing with another’s view, you highlight your motivation for making a similar or different argument. Your reasons for making an argument are what distinguish you, and what makes your thesis arguable and controversial.

3. Interpret, Don’t Evaluate
   An evaluative thesis, such as one that presents your preference, is not controversial. However, an interpretative thesis, where you take and defend a position, is controversial. You can’t argue about opinions, but you can argue over interpretations.
4. Offer a qualification or limitation to the case you've made
   You can present the limitations or qualifications of an argument by presenting a
   standard view and then raising objections to it, or by presenting your own
   argument and then discussing possible objections to it.

5. Write about something that matters to you
   Writing about something that genuinely matters to you, such as an idea that
   changed your view on a particular issue, is a great way to present an interesting
   argument that passes the "so what?" test with flying colors.

Note: Many of these writing tips, as well as the example of a controversial and
uncontroversial thesis, were adapted from They Say/I Say: The Moves That Matter In
Academic Writing by Gerald Graff and Cathy Birkenstein. In addition, several of the
bullet headings for the section on writing a controversial thesis were taken from Gordon
Harvey's "Elements of the Academic Essay." Advice was also inspired by "Novice as
Expert: Writing the Freshman Year" by Nancy Sommers and Laura Saltz.

-Jennifer Somers