

Making a Strong Thesis & Engaging in Rigorous, Respectful Debate

LLMs, Evidence, and Intellectual Responsibility

1. What Is a Thesis Statement?

A **thesis statement** is a **clear, arguable claim** that answers a focused question and guides your entire argument.

A strong thesis:

- **Takes a position** (not just a description or summary)
- **Is specific**, not vague or overly broad
- **Can be challenged** by a reasonable person
- **Signals how or why** the claim is true

Weak vs. Strong Examples (LLM Context)

Weak:

Large Language Models have ethical issues.

Stronger:

Because Large Language Models reproduce patterns from biased training data, their use in high-stakes decision-making requires human oversight to prevent systematic harm.

2. What Makes a Thesis *Rigorous*?

A rigorous thesis is not just confident—it is **carefully justified**.

Ask yourself:

- **What assumptions am I making?**
- **What evidence would count *against* my claim?**
- **What definitions am I relying on?** (e.g., “bias,” “intelligence,” “creativity”)
- **What scope am I claiming?** (All LLMs? Some uses? A specific context?)

Rigorous theses often:

- Include **conditions** (“in educational settings...”, “when used without oversight...”)
- Avoid absolutes unless strongly justified
- Acknowledge complexity without becoming vague

3. Evidence: What Counts?

In this course, evidence may include:

- Peer-reviewed research or reputable reporting
- Concrete examples of LLM behavior
- Thought experiments or counterexamples
- Careful analysis of prompts, outputs, or system design
- Logical reasoning grounded in clear definitions

Important:

Personal opinion alone is not evidence—but **your reasoning is**.

4. Respectful Debate: Disagreeing Well

Respectful debate is not about being “nice”; it’s about being **intellectually honest**.

Good debaters:

- Critique **ideas**, not people
- Represent opposing views **fairly**, even when disagreeing
- Ask clarifying questions before objecting
- Distinguish between **intent**, **impact**, and **evidence**

Productive Phrases

- “I agree with the concern, but I question the conclusion because...”
- “That argument depends on the assumption that...”
- “A possible counterexample might be...”
- “Can we clarify what we mean by...?”

5. What Respectful Debate Is *Not*

- Not dismissing arguments as “obvious” or “ridiculous”
- Not attributing motives (“you only think that because...”)
- Not straw-manning (oversimplifying the opposing view)
- Not treating disagreement as a personal attack

6. The Role of LLMs in Argumentation

LLMs can:

- Help generate ideas or counterarguments
- Surface common perspectives on an issue
- Assist with structure and clarity

But LLMs **cannot**:

- Decide what you should believe
- Replace your responsibility to evaluate evidence
- Take accountability for ethical or factual claims

You are responsible for the thesis you defend.

7. A Final Check Before You Submit or Speak

Before finalizing a thesis or entering a debate, ask:

1. Is my claim clear and specific?
2. Could a reasonable person disagree?
3. What evidence supports my position?
4. Have I fairly represented opposing views?
5. Would I be comfortable defending this claim publicly?

Strong arguments don’t just persuade—they **invite thoughtful disagreement**.