1. Make Careful Observations

As you read or view an object, take notes on things you notice. You might try this two-column system of note-taking. The example we provide is based on the World War II poster below. Notice that we came up with multiple ideas for each observation; this stage is all about exploring possibilities—not limiting them.

**Observations:** what you notice
Whole Arguments
Specific Statements
Word Choice
Formal Qualities

**Meaning:** impact or effect of each observation
Your Response
Agree or Disagree
Make Connections
Ask Questions

**For example:**

Observations
1. red background
2. German translated to English
3. 5 men in uniforms
4. faces have dark lines, with furrowed brows, open mouths with pointy teeth
5. holding papers
6. rejoinder in English
7. comic layout

Meaning
1. anger, passion, color of Nazi flag
2. intended for more than one reader
3. soldiers
4. demonic, frighten the viewer, no joy
5. reading a message, singing a song
6. for English-speaking reader, defiant
7. familiar, expect humor, draw attention
2. Prioritize Observations
Use your notes to find the most significant details and ideas. What stands out?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Look for:</th>
<th>Avoid:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>repetition or similarities</td>
<td>likes, dislikes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>contrasts</td>
<td>assumptions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>anomalies</td>
<td>biases</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Choose the most interesting, revealing, or strange observations and consider why they stand out to you. Try writing a sentence or paragraph explaining why they stand out.

- The faces are interesting and strange because we don’t expect carolers/singers to look like devils.
- The red background is significant because it’s the only color on the poster and the color is associated with strong emotions. It reminds me of fire, passion, love, hell, and the Nazi flag.
- The use of both German and English is interesting because it makes me wonder who the poster was intended for and where it was distributed.

3. Push Ideas Further
Once you have made observations and considered their significance, use some of your best ideas to get closer to a claim. Which ideas relate to one another? What do they add up to? Here are two strategies for pushing your thinking toward an interesting and significant claim.

**Seems X, Really Y**
Challenge your ideas by looking beyond the obvious and seeing larger implications. Apply the same format to each new statement until you reach a more interesting claim.

- The soldiers seem to be angry, but they are really demonic characters.
- The soldiers seem to be demonic characters, but they are really a depiction of Nazis as hostile and evil.
- The poster seems to depict Nazis as hostile and evil, but the demonic soldiers really represent the very idea of America’s enemies.
- The demonic soldiers seem to represent the very idea of America’s enemies, but they really reveal how clearly the line was drawn between good and bad during World War II.

**So What?**
Another way to challenge your ideas is to ask yourself why they matter. This will help you move from simply stating your conclusions to asserting their impact and relevance.

For example:

- “The use of both German and English is interesting because it makes me wonder who might be the audience for the poster.”
  
  **So what?**

- “This is probably intended for an English speaking audience because the German is translated and commented upon in English.”
  
  **So what?**
So What? (cont.)

“If read top to bottom, the poster may be intended to first frighten the English-speaking audience, and then encourage their defiance.”

So what?

“Perhaps because of the historical moment, support for the war depended on awakening both fear and an exaggerated sense of empowerment in the citizenry.”

So what?

4. Form a Thesis Statement
Give yourself time to develop it. Thesis statements often grow and change as you write. When you get to your final statement, don’t forget to include all the necessary information:

the subject under discussion
your claim about it
(and possibly the types of evidence or the logic you will use to prove it)
how or why it matters

Strengthen your thesis statement by making it specific, arguable, narrow, defensible, original, and significant.