

## How to Craft a Thesis Statement for a MST Essay in 7 Steps

*Note: The example prompt was created by Professor Joshua Comaroff for his MST class.*

The skills involved in MST are a mix of what you would have mastered in LH and PPT. Namely, MST essays require that you write a comparative essay on a particular theme, like the final papers in LH. MST essays also demand that you critically analyse the authors' reasons for conclusions, like in PPT.

MST essays do not demand you to close read the texts like in LH, nor break down arguments into premise conclusion form like in PPT. However, thinking about the authors' arguments in terms of reasons leading to conclusions would still be useful in MST.

This handout hopes to guide you in structuring your thought process when dissecting a MST prompt.

### **Step 1:**

Note down keywords in the prompt and list concepts that you think relate to these keywords.

#### *Example*

Prompt: Different theories of social organization are premised on different assumptions about the "nature" of humanity. Discuss this with reference to the social theories of two of the following: Ibn Khaldun, Tocqueville, de Gouges, Wollstonecraft, and Marx.

#### Theories of social organisation

Marx: Division of labour, bourgeoisie / proletariat, means relation and modes of production, alienation, linear path of history

Ibn Khaldun: Cyclical history, desert society to city, moral decay, division of labour

#### Assumptions about the nature of humanity

Marx: Man is expressible and reducible to their labour ("Homo faber")

Khaldun: Man is intrinsically self-interested

**Step 2:**

Identify the point of comparison between the thinkers.

Being explicit on the point of comparison is extremely important, as MST essays are comparative papers. Without a common point of comparison, it would be nearly impossible to coherently compare the ideas of different thinkers.

In this example, the point of comparison is the different assumptions about the nature of humanity. Given such differences, how do these differences impact their respective social theories?

**Step 3:**

Draw out the causal links between the point of comparison and the broader social theories that you are expected to compare. Underline the main concepts of each thinker so that you can contextualise the causal chains within the content that you have learnt in seminar.

This helps you to be clear how smaller concepts build off one another to form a bigger concept.

*Example*Marx

Humanity is expressible through labour -> private property exists, eventually leading to capitalism -> increasing specialisation of labour -> division of labour -> humans are forced to work for survival instead of self-expression -> alienation from labour

Khaldun

Humans are self-interested -> monarchy is necessary to prevent societal collapse -> formation of cities -> increasing luxury and division of labour -> moral decadence -> decline back to desert society -> history repeats (cyclical)

**Step 4:**

Form an opinion about the differences in these causal links: this would be a rough draft of your thesis.

The chain of causal factors that you have created in the last step would help when evaluating the thinker's theories: if A (an assumption / factor) leads to B (a big concept), and A seems unlikely to be true or seems insufficient to lead to B, then B would unlikely to be true or is unlikely to occur.

You do not need to have an opinion about every difference; what matters is that your opinion be relevant to the themes of the thinkers. For example, having an opinion that it is not possible to grow agriculture in desert societies and therefore Marx's conception of primitive societies seems more survivable, is not very helpful because survivability was never a concern of the thinkers.

This part is also similar to what you may have done for comparative papers in PPT: it requires you to put the thinkers in conversation with each other to consider what one thinker would say to another thinker on this particular theme / topic.

Questions that you may consider when forming an opinion:

Could one thinker's theory explain the other thinker's theory equally well or even enhance / add depth to their theories?

Does one thinker's theory fail to explain a certain social theme sufficiently, when seen through the lens of the other thinker's theory?

*Example*

Comparing the thinkers, Marx's theory that the division of labour leads to alienation from labour could also explain Khaldun's cyclic nature of history. Khaldun also recognises that there is increasing division of labour when monarchies are formed, but he does not use it as a factor to explain the decline of the city. Perhaps the phenomenon of alienation from labour is similar to the moral decadence that reverts the city back to a desert society?

Separately, Khaldun's assumption that humans are self-interested could also complement Marx's understanding of capitalism. While private property exists, it does not necessarily mean that it would lead to capitalism, if not for the fact that self-interested humans would want to accumulate as much private property as possible. Hence, Khaldun's assumption provides the motivation for humans to accumulate property.

**Step 5:**

Considering your analysis in the last step, draw up the new causal links for each thinker's theory. Each change in the causal link could be explained as one paragraph in your essay, where you would essentially explain the change and why you think this change is better.

Here the other thinker's theory is underlined to serve as a reminder that you are using the other thinker's theory to complement / critique each other.

*Example*

Increasing luxury and division of labour -> alienation from labour ("moral decadence") -> decline of the city

Private property exists -> humans are self-interested -> everyone wants to accumulate as much property / wealth as possible -> capitalism

**Step 6:**

Summarise the changes to the causal links; this would be your thesis statement of your essay.

*Example*

I argue that Marx's assumption that humans express themselves through labour can explain Khaldun's decline of the city through the concept of alienation from labour. Further, Khaldun's assumption that humans are self-interested can also explain Marx's theory of how capitalism occurs by providing the motivation for humans to accumulate as much property as possible.

**Step 7:**

And you're done! What remains is to simply explain your thesis for the rest of your essay; it is the same process and structure as explaining any other thesis in LH or PPT.