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Title: Developing a Topic

Date of Creation: 12/09

Last Updated: 12/09

URL: http://www.wou.edu/provost/library/clip/tutorials/dev_topic.htm

Target Audience: Early undergraduates

Learning Objective: This tutorial will help students generate effective search terms for Internet or database searching.

Keywords: search terms, keywords, searching, web, database, topics, subtopics

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SLIDE 1 NAVIGATION

SLIDE 2 INTRODUCTION

It's time to write a paper, but what are you going to write about?

There are so many topics you could study, but what sort of topic actually makes a good paper?

This tutorial will help you to develop a topic for a research paper.

We'll talk about some goals to keep in mind when you're developing your topic, some possible approaches to take, how to broaden and narrow your topic,

and we'll briefly talk about some resources that can help you along the way.

SLIDE 3 TOPIC AND THESIS

First, let's take a quick look at an overview of the research process.

Come up with some topic ideas.

Next, do some background research to find some more information about your topic ideas.

As you do background research, you might add ideas to your topic list or you might change them altogether.

After you've got some good topic ideas, it can be helpful to format your ideas into a question that can be answered.

You can think of this as the question you're trying to answer as you're doing in-depth research, which is the next step in the process.

As you're doing in-depth research, that is, looking for articles or other sources to include in your paper, keep in mind that you can change or further develop your topic question.

Research is a dynamic process, so don't be afraid to discover new things.

After doing some in-depth research, it's time to formulate your thesis.

Your thesis is the major claim that you'll make in your paper, and you'll use all of the sources from your research to support that claim.

If you think of your topic as a question, you can think of your thesis as the answer to that question.

This tutorial will focus on the first part of the research process in which you develop your topic.

Example:

Step 1, Brainstorm topic ideas:

“Afghanistan, history, women”

Step 2, do background research

Step 3, develop a topic question

“How have gender roles changed in Afghanistan throughout history?”

Step 4, do in-depth research

Step 4, develop a thesis

“The Taliban severely limited the personal freedoms of Afghani women after taking control of the country in 1996.”

SLIDE 4 GOALS

Let's talk about some basic goals to keep in mind when you're coming up with a topic to write about.

You want to make sure that the paper that you write meets all of your assignment requirements. Read your assignment closely.

Next, make sure to choose a topic that's interesting to you and would be interesting to others reading your paper.

When you choose a topic that you're interested in, you do better research. This will make your life a lot easier.

Finally, you want to make sure that you choose a topic that other people have written about.

Ask yourself, is my topic something that other people might have studied and published articles about?

Thinking about your topic from the point of view of others will also make your research and your life a lot easier.

SLIDE 5 BRAINSTORMING MAIN IDEAS

When you're coming up with your topic, try to think of a few broad areas that you'd be interested in studying.

Maybe you've read or heard news items about these areas, or maybe you talked about them in class.

When you have a broad area or two in mind, brainstorm all of the possible associations that pop into your head related to those ideas.

It might help to write this process down.

Examples:

Broad topic: "Polar Bears"

Associations: "ice, cubs, pollution, hunting, diet, environmental icon, population, melting"

Broad topic: "Afghanistan"

Associations: "history, war, Taliban, Soviets, economy, geography, class, women"

SLIDE 6 BRAINSTORMING APPROACHES

After you've brainstormed some ideas and associations, it can help to think about approaches that might help you to further develop your topic.

Examples:

Historic, consider a time period: "How have gender roles changed since World War II?"

Geographical, consider a geographical area: "How are gender roles expressed in Afghanistan?"

Sociological, consider a group of people: "How do gender roles in Afghanistan impact the daily lives of women?"

SLIDE 7 BROADENING, NARROWING

It's also important to consider the scope of your topic.

If it is too broad, it might be tough to find information that is relevant to you.

If your topic is too narrow, it might be tough to find any information at all.

Generally, it is good to start out with a slightly broad topic that you can further develop and narrow as you find information.

While you're researching, keep in mind that you can always go back and change or further develop your topic as you discover sources.

Be open to discovering new ideas as you research. That's what makes it interesting.

Examples:

Too broad: "History or women"

Better: "History of female gender roles in Afghanistan during the 20th century"

Too narrow: "Current child-rearing practices of women in Kabul, Afghanistan"

Better: "How gender roles in Afghanistan impact the lives of women"

SLIDE 8 RESOURCES

There are many resources that can help you as you're developing your topic.

First, take another look over the class readings. You'll probably find some good sources to start out with there.

Next, take a look over any notes that you've kept for the class. What topics did you talk about in class that seemed interesting?

If you didn't take any notes- this is a reason to start.

Next, websites like Google and Wikipedia might be helpful while you're doing background research.

While sites on the free web might be helpful while you're trying to get a broad idea about your topic, keep in mind that they may not all be authoritative.

So, it's best to view these sites as a place to get some ideas for further research.

Your library will also provide access to online databases like CQ Researcher that can really help you develop topics.

And, keep in mind that there are always books, like encyclopedias, that are great places to get some ideas for topics.

You might find that resources provided by your library can be really helpful, and you can access many of these resources online through your library's website.

SLIDE 9 MORE QUESTIONS

Have more questions about developing a topic?

Contact a librarian! They can help you with these questions.

Check out your library's website for hours and contact info.