First-Year Seminar Tutorial

Defining a topic
Deciding on a topic is one of the simplest, yet can be one of the toughest, parts of writing a research paper. The resources in this tutorial can help you brainstorm different topic ideas.
Brainstorming is a fancy term for tossing ideas around. It is perfectly fine to toss nebulous, half formed ideas – they don’t have to be expertly thought out. You can record them using electronic tools (see next slide), a whiteboard, a pencil and paper, or even a word processing document or other electronic tool.

Once you have come up with some ideas, try freely associating between them – this is often done by drawing lines to indicate where ideas connect.

Also on the following slide you will find sources to help you identify topic ideas.
Defining a topic: brainstorming

Electronic brainstorming tools:

- MindMeister
- Popplet
- Bubbl.us

Online sources for general topic ideas:

- Opposing Viewpoints In Context (WSU login required)
- Topic Selection Helper
- Pros & Cons of Controversial Issues
- Public Agenda
Defining a topic: ask yourself

Ask yourself the following questions about a potential topic to make sure you are selecting a topic that will keep both yourself and your audience engaged. If you can answer yes to these questions, you're ready to craft a research question.

• Am I interested in this topic?
• Will I enjoy researching it?
• Will I enjoy sharing my information with my audience?
• Will they be interested in this topic?

Adapted from the University of Hawaii’s Selecting a Speech Topic. Retrieved from http://www.hawaii.edu/mauispeech/html/selecting_your_topic.html
It is important to understand that simply picking a topic is not enough. You must understand and articulate what precisely you would like to know about that topic. When you do this, you move beyond simply defining a topic. You move into the process of crafting a research question.
Crafting a research question

Part of the process of refining a research topic into a research question is defining the scope of the question. The New Literacies Alliance at Kansas State University has developed a tutorial on defining the scope of a research question – it is the next tutorial on this webpage.

Remember, a research topic is a subject that interests you. A research question is something specific you want to know about your topic. It asks something either unknown or only partly known. The answer (or at least elements of the answer) are still open to investigation. Subsequent First-Year Seminar Tutorials will help you devise a strategy for answering research questions.

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