25.2 Date My Topic

Define your goal

Use this exercise to uncover what is already known, arguable, and/or current about an issue you are interested in writing about before you commit to a lengthy project.

Background

Most of us would never buy a pair of shoes, meet a stranger for coffee, or even choose a TV comedy show to watch for an hour without doing a little research first (are the shoes durable? does the stranger have a social media profile that shows whether or not he likes dogs?). Yet students in school often "choose a topic" for a project they will spend hours, days, or long weeks on without looking around to find out whether it's really as interesting and manageable as they hope—or whether there are better options. Doing some early-stage research can help us confidently select, or smartly avoid, an area of inquiry to follow.

Take action

Set your standards: Just like you consider your criteria for clothes to buy or people to date, you should identify what you're looking for in a good topic for a project. Does it need to be something you're interested in, or related to a course theme? Should it be highly controversial, currently under discussion, significant to your region, or accessible to novice readers? Will you benefit if you can easily locate credible research on the issue, if the topic is very broad or very narrow, or if there's a problem that nobody has solved yet? Begin by writing the 3-5 most important characteristics of your "dream topic."

Name your goal: An online shoe store will allow you to select specific aspects of your shoes by name: you know that if you choose a particular brand name, a type of shoe (loafer vs. athletic), a price-range, or a color, you will home in on different shoes. When you look for information about your topic, the focus and exact words of your search will determine what you find out. List 4-6 questions that you most want to find out right now. Then list 8-10 words you might use to search for information: be sure to include synonyms (car, automobile, vehicle) for some key terms, because not all search engines will catch related issues.

Find out the mainstream view: Although your instructor may caution you that sites like Wikipedia, Yahoo News, or Joe's Cool Website are not credible enough for the purposes of your final project, they can help you find out whether you want to start a long-term relationship with this issue. Choose a question or a search phrase, and search at least two of the following ways: Search on one or more common platforms (Google, Yahoo, Bing, or even TikTok); search by using

a "News" tab or adding "News about" to your search string; search by adding a descriptor like "Controversies about ___," "Reviews of ___," or "History of ____" to your open search; search using a generative-artificial-intelligence tool like ChatGPT. Remember this is just a date: skim articles quickly rather than reading them. Write several sentences: what are people interested in, arguing about, or discovering related to your topic? Also, what related issues—and what specific terminology—do they identify that you might find useful?

Find out the scholarly view: If you're writing for a class project, you should probably know a little about what people who hang around colleges and universities are saying about your topic. Maybe they've decided it's not very interesting any more—or conversely, maybe they've decided it's even more exciting than you think. Choose at least one of the following strategies to find out:

- Search in Google Scholar or another research-oriented engine in the open internet
- Search in a general database from your library, like ProQuest or Academic Search Complete or your library's main search engine
- Search in a relevant subject-specific database from your library, such as Psychological Abstracts
- Use a chatbot or other Gen-AI tool and specify that you want sources that come from published research taken from highly credible journals

Remember this is just a date: Skim the abstracts or descriptions quickly rather than reading them. Write several sentences: what are people interested in, arguing about, or discovering related to your topic? Also, what related issues—and what specific *terminology*—do they identify that you might find useful?

Reflect to learn and connect

Look back at your key criteria for a "dream topic." Suggest two ways that you might narrow, focus, or change your original topic idea to build the best possible relationship with this project going forward.

Explore related exercises

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