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Lesson Proper for Week 2

Relating Your Personal Ideas to a Scholarly Problem

Try to make a connection between your interests and the inherent issues of the subject. For instance, a student whose mother became seriously addicted to the Internet developed a paper from the personal experiences of her dysfunctional family.

1. Relate your experiences to scholarly problems and academic disciplines.
2. Speculate about the subject by listing issues, asking questions, engaging in free writing, and using other idea-generating techniques.

Connecting Personal Experience to Scholarly Topics

You can't write a personal essay and call it a research paper, yet you can choose topics close to your life. Use one of the techniques described in the following list:

1. Combine personal interests with an aspect of academic studies:

Personal interest: Skiing

Academic subject: Sports medicine

Possible topics: "Protecting the Knees"

"Therapy for Strained Muscles"

"Skin Treatments"

2. Consider social issues that affect you and your family:

Personal interest: The education of my child

Social issue: The behavior of my child in school

Possible topics: "Children Who Are Hyperactive"

"Should Schoolchildren Take Medicine to Calm Their Hyperactivity?"

3. Consider scientific subjects, if appropriate:

Personal interest: The ponds and well water on the family farm

Scientific subject: Chemical toxins in the water

Possible topic: "The Poisoning of Underground Water Tables"

4. Let your cultural background prompt you toward detailed research into your heritage, your culture, or the mythology of your ethnic background:

Ethnic background: Native American

Personal interest: History of the Apache tribes

Possible topic: "The Indian Wars from the Native American's Point of View"

Ethnic background: Hispanic

Personal interest: Struggles of the Mexican child in an American classroom

Possible topic: "Bicultural Experiences of Hispanic

Students: The Failures and Triumphs"

Hint: Learn the special language of the academic discipline and use it. Every field of study, whether sociology, geology, or literature, has words to describe its analytical approach to topics, such as the *demographics* of a target audience (marketing), the *function* of loops and arrays (computer science), the *symbolism* of Maya Angelou's poetry (literature), and *observation* of human subjects (psychology). Part of your task is learning the terminology and using it appropriately.

Speculating about Your Subject to Discover Ideas and to Focus on the Issues

At some point you may need to sit back, relax, and use your imagination to contemplate the issues and problems worthy of investigation. Ideas can be generated in the following ways:

Free Writing

To free write, merely focus on a topic and write whatever comes to mind. Do not worry about grammar, style, or penmanship, but keep writing nonstop for a page or so to develop valuable phrases, comparisons, personal anecdotes, and specific thoughts that help focus issues of concern.

Listing Keywords

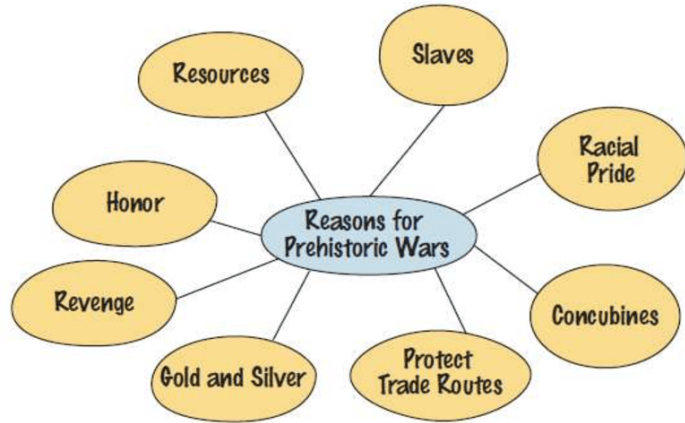
Keep a list of words, the fundamental terms that you see in the literature. These can help focus the direction of your research.

Arranging Keywords into a Rough Outline

Writing a preliminary outline early in the project might help you see if the topic has substance so you can sustain it for the length required.

Clustering

Another method for discovering the hierarchy of your primary topics and subtopics is to cluster ideas around a central subject. The cluster of related topics can generate a multitude of interconnected ideas.



Narrowing by Comparison

Comparison limits a discussion to specific differences. Any two works, any two persons, any two groups may serve as the basis for a comparative study.

Asking Questions

Research is a process of seeking answers to questions. Hence, the most effective researchers are those who learn to ask questions and seek answers. Raising questions about the subject can provide clear boundaries for the paper.

Talking with Others to Refine the Topic

Personal Interviews and Discussions

Like some researchers, you may need to consult formally with an expert on the topic or explore a subject informally while having coffee or a soda with a colleague, relative, or work associate. Ask people in your community for ideas and for their reactions to your general subject.

Online Discussion Groups

What are other people saying about your subject? You might share ideas and messages with other scholars interested in your subject. Somebody may answer a question or point to an interesting aspect that has not occurred to you. With discussion groups, you have a choice:

- Classroom e-mail groups that participate in online discussions of various issues.
- Online courses that feature a discussion room.
- Discussion groups on the Internet.
- Real-time chatting with participants online—even with audio and video, in some cases.

Checklist

CHECKLIST

Exploring Ideas with Others

- Consult with your instructor.
- Discuss your topic with three or four classmates.
- Listen to the concerns of others.
- Conduct a discussion or an interview.
- Join a computer discussion group.
- Take careful notes.
- Adjust your research accordingly.

Using Online Searches to Refine Your Topic

The Internet provides a quick and easy way to find a topic and refine it to academic standards. Chapter 4 discusses these matters in greater detail. For now, use the subject directories and keyword searches.

Using an Online Subject Directory

Many search engines have a subject directory that organizes sources by topic. For example, Yahoo! Directory organizes online sources in broad categories like arts and humanities, education, social sciences, and so forth. If you started with a topic such as “alternative medicine,” you would quickly realize that your topic was too broad: Yahoo! Directory lists more than forty subtopics for “alternative medicine.” The directory might help to identify a narrower topic, such as aromatherapy or meditation, that you might be able to research more effectively.

Because you want to present an academic study about your topic, you might also conduct an online search using Google Scholar. This Web program can direct your search across many disciplines through articles, theses, books, and abstracts that are presented by academic publishers, professional societies, online repositories, universities, and other websites. **Google Scholar** helps you find relevant work across the world of scholarly research.

However, the Internet has made it difficult to apply traditional evaluations to an electronic article: Is it accurate, authoritative, objective, current, timely, and thorough in coverage? Some Internet sites are advocates to special interests, some sites market products or sprinkle the site with banners to

commercial sites and sales items, some sites are personal home pages, and then many sites offer objective news and scholarly information. The answers:

1. Go to the reliable databases available through your library, such as InfoTrac, ERIC, ProQuest, and EBSCOhost. These are monitored sites that give information filtered by editorial boards and peer review. You can reach them from remote locations at home or the dorm by connecting electronically to your library.
2. Look for articles on the Internet that first appeared in a printed version. These will have been, in most cases, examined by an editorial board.
3. Look for a reputable sponsor, especially a university, museum, or professional organization.
4. Consult Chapter 4, which discusses the pros and cons of Internet searching.

Using an Internet Keyword Search

Using Google or a similar search engine allows you to search for keywords related to your topic. A keyword search for “American history manuscripts,” for example, leads to the Library of Congress page shown in Figure 2.1. This page allows users to search the Library’s manuscript collection by keyword, name and subject, date, or topic. Topic headings include military history, diplomacy and foreign policy, and women’s history, all of which would help find sources leading to a more focused topic.

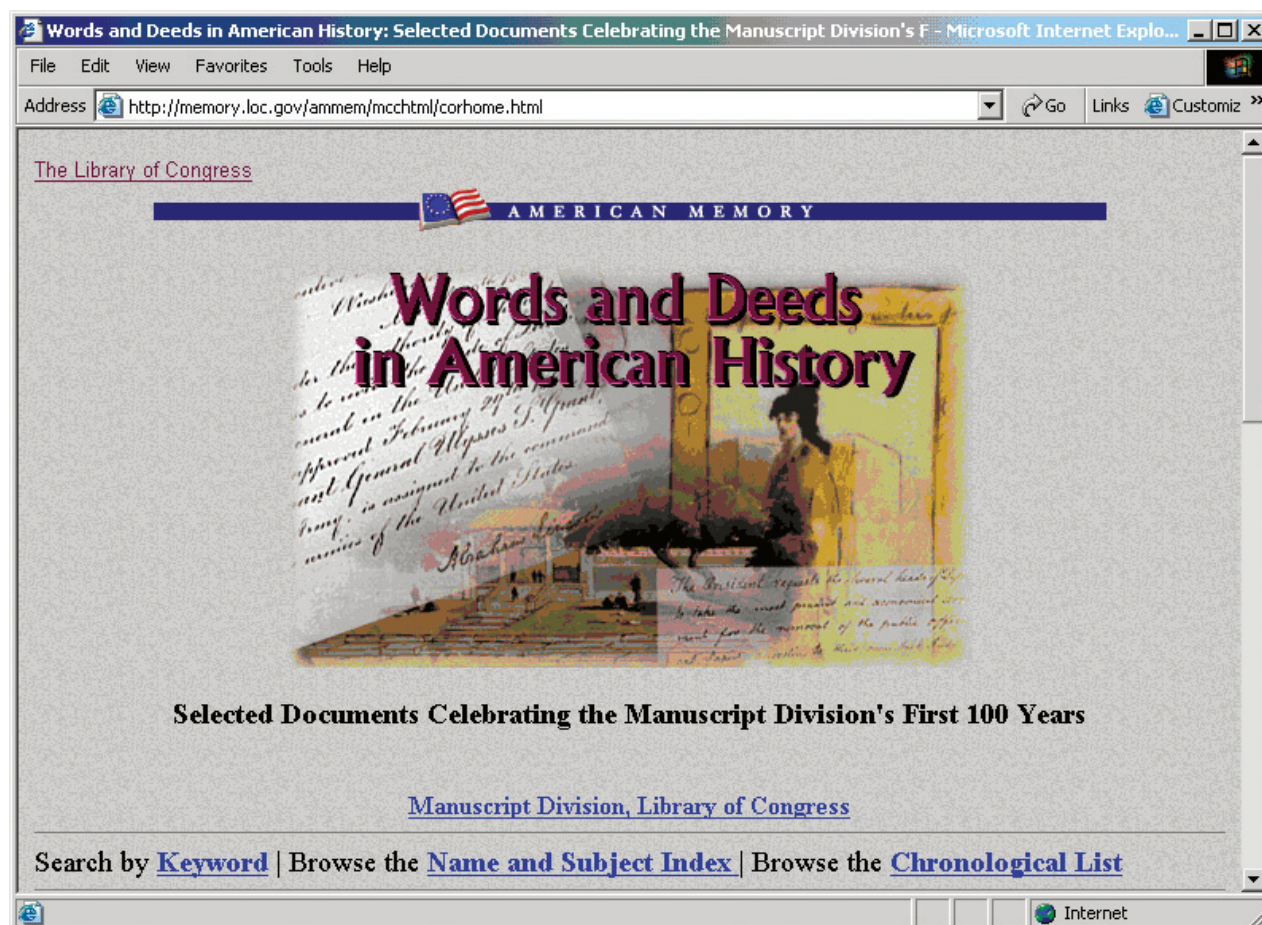


Figure 2.1 A Library of Congress site “Words and Deeds in American History,” found by using a keyword search for American history manuscripts.

Using the Library’s Electronic Databases to Find and Narrow a Topic

College libraries have academic databases not found on general search engines, such as InfoTrac, ERIC, and ProQuest. These database files are reliable because they refer you to thousands of articles that have been peer reviewed by experts or filtered through editorial processes. For now, examine various titles as you search for your own topic. If you see one of interest, click on it for more information.

Follow these steps:

1. **Select a database.** Some databases, such as InfoTrac and ProQuest, are general; use them to find a subject. Other databases focus on one discipline; for example, ERIC indexes search only specific educational sources. These databases will move you quickly to a list of articles on your topic.
2. **List keywords or a phrase to describe your topic, enclosed within quotation marks.** Avoid using just one general word. For example, the word *forestry* on the Electronic Library database produced over 5,000 possible sites. The two-word phrase “forest conservation” produced a more manageable number of sites. Here is one of the entries: “A New Year for Forest Policy.” Jami Westerhold. *American Forests*.
3. **Examine the various entries for possible topics.** Look for relevant articles, browse the descriptions, read the abstracts, and—when you find something valuable—print the full text, if it is available.

Using the Library’s Electronic Book Catalog to Find a Topic

Instructors expect you to cite information from a few books, and the library’s book index will suggest topics and confirm that your subject has been treated with in-depth studies in book form, not just on the Internet or in magazines. Called by different names at each library (e.g., Acorn, Felix, Access), the electronic index lists all books housed in the library, as well as other helpful items. It does not index articles in magazines and journals, but it will tell you which periodicals are housed in the library and whether they are in printed form or on microforms. Like the electronic databases described before, the index will help you find a workable topic by guiding you quickly from general subjects to subtopics and, finally, to specific books.

Hint: Topic selection goes beyond choosing a general category (e.g., “single mothers”). It includes finding a research-provoking issue or question, such as “The foster parent program seems to have replaced the orphanage system. Has it been effective?” That is, you need to take a stand, adopt a belief, or begin asking questions.

Developing a Thesis Statement, Enthymeme, or Hypothesis

One central statement will usually control an essay’s direction and content, so as early as possible, begin thinking in terms of a controlling idea. Each has a separate mission:

- A **thesis statement** advances a conclusion the writer will defend: *Contrary to what some philosophers have advanced, human beings have always participated in wars.*

- An **enthymeme** uses a “because” clause to make a claim the writer will defend: *There has never been a “noble savage,” as such, because even prehistoric human beings fought frequent wars for numerous reasons.*
- A **hypothesis** is a theory that must be tested in the lab, in the literature, and/or by field research to prove its validity: *Human beings are motivated by biological instincts toward the physical overthrow of perceived enemies.*

Drafting a Research Proposal

A research proposal is presented in one of two forms: (1) a short paragraph to identify the project for yourself and your instructor, or (2) a formal, multipage report that provides background information, your rationale for conducting the study, a review of the literature, your methods, and the conclusions you hope to prove.

The Short Proposal

A short proposal identifies five essential ingredients of your work:

- The specific topic
- The purpose of the paper (to explain, analyze, or argue)
- The intended audience (general or specialized)
- Your voice as the writer (informer or advocate)
- The preliminary thesis statement or opening hypothesis

CHECKLIST

Addressing the Reader

Identify your audience. Have you visualized your audience, its expertise, and its expectations? Your perception of the reader will affect your voice, style, and choice of words.

Identify your discipline. Readers in each discipline will bring differing expectations to your paper with regard to content, language, design, and documentation format.

Meet the needs of your readers. Are you saying something worthwhile? Something new? Do not bore the reader with known facts from an encyclopedia. (This latter danger is the reason many instructors discourage the use of an encyclopedia as a source.)

Engage and even challenge your readers. Find an interesting or different point of view. For example, a report on farm life can become a challenging examination of chemical contamination because of industrial sprawl into rural areas, and an interpretation of a novel can become an examination of the prison system rather than a routine discourse on theme or characterization.

The Long Proposal

Some instructors may assign the long proposal, which includes some or all of the following elements:

1. A **cover page** with the title of the project, your name, and the person or agency to whom you are submitting the proposal.
2. If required, add an **abstract** that summarizes your project in 50 to 100 word.
3. Include a **purpose statement** with your *rationale* for the project. In essence, this is your thesis statement or hypothesis, along with your identification of the audience that your work will address and the role you will play as investigator and advocate.
4. A **statement of qualification** that explains your experience and, perhaps, the special qualities you bring to the project.
5. A **review of the literature**, which surveys the articles and books that you have examined in your preliminary work.
6. A **description of your research methods**, which is the design of the *materials* you will need, your *timetable*, and, where applicable, your *budget*.

CHECKLIST

Explaining Your Purpose in the Research Proposal

Research papers accomplish several tasks:

- They explain and define the topic.
 - They analyze the specific issues.
 - They persuade the reader with the weight of the evidence.
1. Use **explanation** to review and itemize factual data. Sarah Bemis explains how diabetes can be managed and Clare Grady explains the pressures associated with the space race in the 1960s.
 2. Use **analysis** to classify various parts of the subject and to investigate each one in depth. Ashley Irwin examines the emotions in poetry generated by tragic life events, and Caitlin Kelley analyzes the importance of recess for elementary students.
 3. Use **persuasion** to question the general attitudes about a problem and then affirm new theories, advance a solution, recommend a course of action, or—at least—invite the reader into an intellectual dialog.

◀ Preliminary Activity for Week 2

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Preliminary Activity for Week 2



Lesson Proper for Week 2



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